

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

*or* AWAKENED INDIA

A monthly journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



**Sister Nivedita: Offered to India**  
**January 2017**

Vol. 122, No. 1

₹ 100.00

# THE ROAD TO WISDOM

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S

## *Letter to Sister Nivedita*

**M**y dear Miss Noble,  
A letter from Sturdy reached me yesterday, informing me that you are determined to come to India and see things with your own eyes. I replied to that yesterday, but what I learnt from Miss Muller about your plans makes this further note necessary, and it is better that it should be direct. Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman—a real lioness—to work for the Indians, women specially. India cannot yet produce great women, she must borrow them from other nations. Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination, and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted. Yet the difficulties are many. You cannot form any idea of misery, the superstition, and the slavery that are here. You will be in the midst of a mass of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of caste and isolation, shunning the white skin through fear or hatred and hated by them intensely. On the other hand, you will be looked upon by the white as a crank, and every one of your movements will be watched with suspicion. Then the climate is fearfully hot; our winter in most places being like your summer, and in the south it is always blazing. Not one European comfort is to be had in places out of the cities. If in spite of all this, you dare venture into the work, you are welcome, a hundred times welcome. As for me, I am nobody here as elsewhere, but what little influence I have shall be devoted



to your service. You must think well before you plunge in; and after work, if you fail in this or get disgusted, on my part I promise you, I will stand by you unto death whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta or remain in it. 'The tusks of the elephant come out, but never go back'; so are the words of a man never retracted. I promise you that. Again, I must give you a bit of warning. You must stand on your own feet. Friendship with many is best at a distance, and everything goes well with the person who stands on his own feet. Mrs. Sevier is a jewel of a lady—so good, so kind! The Seviers are the only English people who do not hate the natives, Sturdy not excepted. Mr. and Mrs. Sevier are the only persons who did not come to patronise us, but they have no fixed plans yet. When you come, you may get them to work with you, and that will be really helpful to them and to you. But after all it is absolutely necessary to stand on one's own feet.

With everlasting love,  
Yours ever in the Lord,  
Vivekananda

---

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(Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2016), 7. 488-90.



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Growing Legacies



**Vol. 122, No. 1**  
**January 2017**

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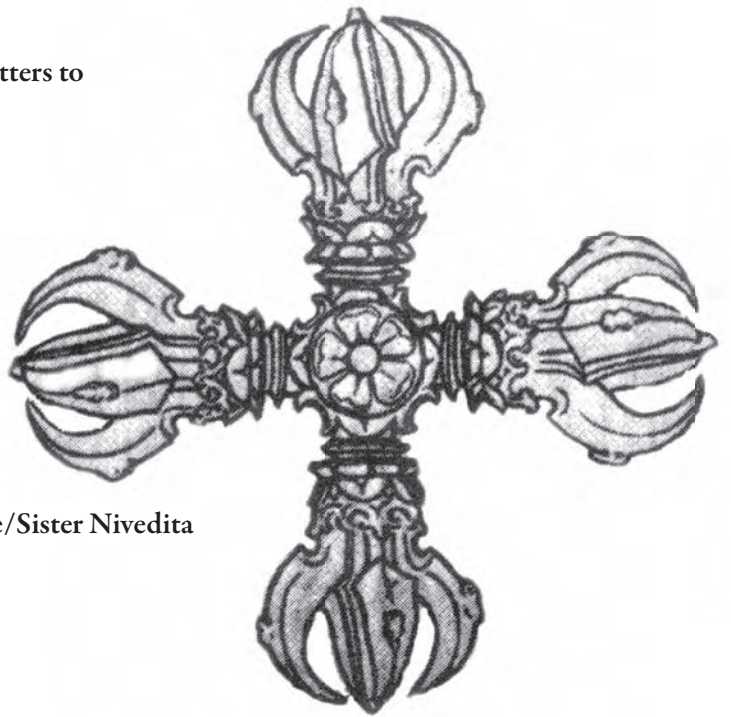
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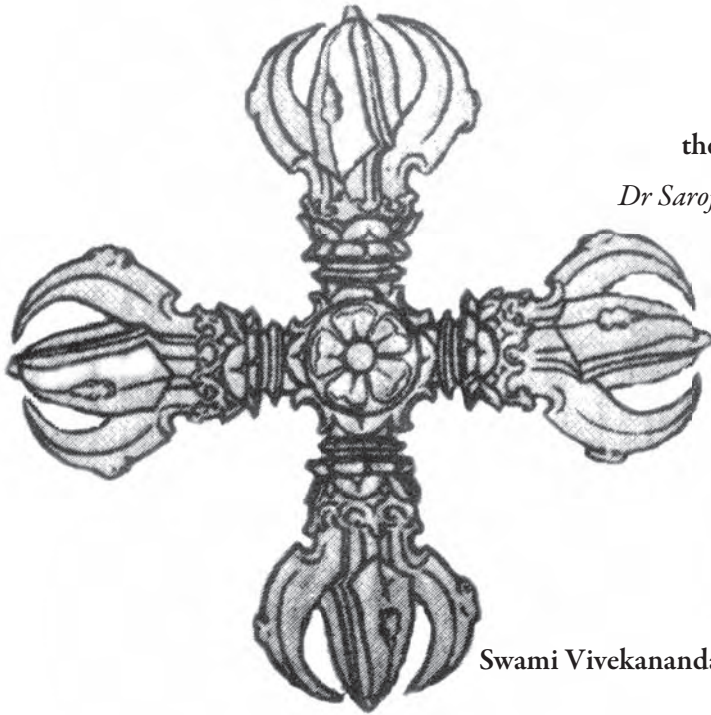
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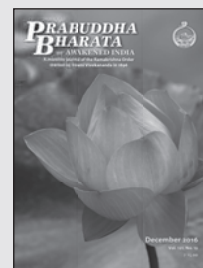
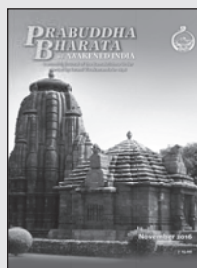
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Nivedita - R.R. - X.

## TO OUR READERS

INDIA is undergoing a process of waking up from millennia-old slumber. As Swami Vivekananda prophesied, such an awakening would bring tremendous power into action. Hence, it is imperative that a resilient spirit, of assimilating all shocks of turbulence that could result from a phenomenal increase in the Indian national power, be developed much before a significant national awakening. As chance would have it, India and the rest of the world celebrate the sesquicentennial anniversary of Sister Nivedita tailing similar celebrations of her guru, Swamiji. This issue of *Prabuddha Bharata* is dedicated to the sterling offering to India that Swamiji made in Nivedita.

Nivedita's thought offers an aggressive dynamism generally not associated with matters religious or spiritual. Any awakening has to begin with dynamism and it is probably with this note that India would awaken. Despite highly optimistic accounts of India having arrived, it is only reasonable to surmise that Swamiji's vision of Indian reawakening was much broader and in-depth than whatever fleeting images of glory India has managed to attain in the recent past. Apologetics have never created history. Nivedita asks us, people from India and the rest of the world, to unapologetically pursue one's ideals, only in a language more direct and piercing than her guru.

We have attempted to bring together hitherto lesser-known aspects of the multi-faceted personality that Nivedita was. It is our hope and earnest prayer that this issue of *Prabuddha Bharata* would motivate the readers to study and practice Nivedita's thought.

This year we continue to endeavour towards simplifying abstruse Vedantic concepts and with this aim we start a new column *Balabodha*, where we would decode one Vedantic term every month, in a contemporary and lucid language. We are sure that this column would encourage readers to take up a deeper study of Vedanta.

We thank our subscribers and readers for having supported us for these 121 years. We invite them to send us letters or emails, giving their feedback, and also expressing their views on issues that find place in the pages of this journal. We thank the staff of the journal for ensuring a smooth ride. We are grateful to all the authors, reviewers, photographers, artists, publishers who have sent their books for review, proofreaders, copyeditors, advertisers, patrons, donors, web page designers, and well-wishers. Their support and encouragement has ensured that gems of wisdom and insights of depth have reached the minds of countless, month after month, year after year.



# TRADITIONAL WISDOM

उत्तिष्ठत जाग्रत प्राप्य वरान्निबोधत ।

**Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!**

## Maitrayaniya Upanishad

January 2017  
Vol. 122, No. 1

### मैत्रायणीयोपनिषत्

तमो वा इदमग्र आसीदेकं तत् परे स्यात् तत्तत्परेणोरितं विषमत्वं प्रयात्येतद्रूपं वै रजस्तद्रजः खल्वीरितं  
विषमत्वं प्रयात्येतद्वै सत्त्वस्य रूपं तत्सत्त्वमेवेरितं रसः सम्प्रास्रवत् सोऽंशोयं यश्चेतामात्रः प्रतिपुरुषः  
क्षेत्रज्ञः सङ्कल्पाध्यवसायाभिमानलिङ्गः प्रजापतिर्विश्वेत्यस्य प्रागुक्ता एतास्तनवः । अथ यो ह खलु  
वावास्य तामसोऽंशोऽसौ स ब्रह्मचारिणो योऽयं रुद्रोऽथ यो ह खलु वावास्य राजसोऽंशोऽसौ स  
ब्रह्मचारिणो योऽयं ब्रह्माथ यो ह खलु वावास्य सात्त्विकोऽंशोऽसौ स ब्रह्मचारिणो योऽयं विष्णुः  
स वा एष एकस्त्रिधा भूतोऽष्टधैकादशधा द्वादशधाऽपरिमितधावोद्भूतं भूतेषु चरति प्रविष्टः स  
भूतानामधिपतिर्बभूवा इत्यसा आत्मान्तर्बहिश्चान्तर्बहिश्च

॥५.२॥

*Tamo va idam-agra asid-ekam tat pare syat tat-tat-paren-eritam vishamatvam prayat-yetad-  
rupam vai rajas-tad-rajah khalviritam vishamatvam prayat-yetad-vai sattvasya rupam tat-  
sattvam-everitam rasah samprasravat so'mshoyam yashchetamatrah pratipurushah kshetrajnah  
samkalpa-adhyavasaya-abhimanalingah prajapatir-vishvety-asya pragukta etas-tanavah. Atha  
yo ha khalu vavasya tamaso'msho'so sa brahmacharino yo'yam rudro'tha yo ha khalu vavasya  
rajaso'msho'sau sah brahmacharino yo'yam brahmatha yo ha khalu vavasya sattviko'msho'sau sa  
brahmacharino yo'yam vishnuh sa va esha ekastridha bhuto'shtadha-aikadashadha dvadashadha  
a'parimitadhavodbhutam bhuteshu charati pravishtah sa bhutanam-adhipatir-babhuva ityasa  
atmantar-bahishchantar-bahishcha*

(5.2)

Indeed, in the beginning this universe was one tamas. That was in the highest. When impelled by the highest, it moves on to differentiation. That form, indeed, is rajas. That rajas, when impelled, moves on to differentiation. That, indeed, is sattva's form. That sattva, when impelled, flows forth the essence. That part is the intelligent principle in every person, the knower of the body that has the signs of resolution, perseverance, and egotism. The forms of Prajapati called Vishva have been told earlier. O brahmacharis, now, indeed, his tamasic part is Rudra. O brahmacharis, now, indeed, his rajasic part is Brahma. O brahmacharis, now, indeed, his sattvic part is Vishnu. Indeed, that one becomes threefold. He developed forth eightfold, eleven-fold, twelve-fold, and in unlimited parts. Because he developed thus, he is a created being and moves about, having entered all beings. He became the lord of all created beings. That is the self within and without, yes, within and without. (5.2)

द्विधा वा एष आत्मानं बिभर्त्य यं यः प्राणो यश्चासा आदित्योऽथ द्वौ वा एता अस्य पन्थाना  
अन्तर्बहिश्चाऽहोरात्रेणैतौ व्यावर्तेते । असौ वा आदित्यो बहिरात्मान्तरात्मा प्राणोऽतो बहिरात्मक्या  
गत्यान्तरात्मनोऽनुमीयते गतिरित्येवं ह्याहाथ यः कश्चिद्विद्वानपहतपाप्माऽक्षाध्यक्षोऽवदातमनास्तन्निष्ठा  
आवृत्तचक्षुः सो अन्तरात्मक्या गत्या बहिरात्मनोऽनुमीयते गतिरित्येवं ह्याह । अथ य एषोऽन्तरादित्ये  
हिरण्मयः पुरुषो यः पश्यतीमां हिरण्यवस्थात् स एषोऽन्तरे हृत्पुष्कर एवाश्रितोऽन्नमति ॥६.१॥

*Dvidha va esha atmanam bibhartya yam yah prano yashchasa adityo'tha dvau va eta asya  
panthana antar-bahishcha-ahoratrena-etau vyavartete. Asau va adityo bahiratma-antaratma  
prano'to bahiratmakya gaty-antara-atmano'numiyate gativity-evam hyayatha yah kashchid-  
vidvan-apahata-papma'kshadhyaksho'vadata-manastan-nishta avritta-chakshuh so antratmakya  
gatya bahiratmano'numiyate gativity-evam hyaha. Atha ya esho'ntaraditye hiranmayah purusho  
yah pashyatimam hiranyavasthat sa esho'ntara britpushkara evashrito'nnamati* (6.1)

This self bears himself in two ways, as he who is the vital energy and he who is the Sun. Therefore, two indeed are these paths—inward and outward. They both turn back in a day and night. That Sun, indeed, is the outer self, the inner self is the vital energy. Hence, the course of the inner self is inferred from the course of the outer self. For it has been said: 'Now, whoever is a knower, who has freed oneself from evil, the one presiding over the senses, pure-minded, firmly established in that, with senses turned inward, is the self.' Likewise, the course of the outer self is inferred by the course of the inner self. For it has been said: 'Now that golden person, who is within the Sun, who looks on this earth from his golden state, is the one who has entered into the lotus of the heart and consumes food. (6.1)

# *Sister Nivedita: Vajra Shakti*

SISTER NIVEDITA was offered to India. Her offering was in all respects. No human being can be more completely offered to any cause than what Swami Vivekananda offered through Sister Nivedita. It was an offering in all dimensions. All the manifestations of human power including maternal love were offered to the cause of the building, rather rebuilding, of a nation. Swamiji never did anything in any manner that was less than thorough. He wanted a 'root and branch reform' and he made a 'root and branch' offering. Today, the amount of attention given to Sister Nivedita in the country of her birth is not even a minute fraction of the reverence she is accorded in India. Nivedita is synonymous with India as was her guru, Swamiji.

Any attempt to describe or remember Nivedita is an attempt to remember Swamiji and it is also an attempt to remember the centuries-old cultural, social, political, philosophical, and spiritual history of India. Any such attempt can only be an attempt merely scratching at the outermost covering of the shell that contains gems of invaluable wisdom. At best, one can only draw pointers to this timeless treasure. Sister Nivedita was being prepared to be offered to India since her birth. Just as the first fruit of a tree is traditionally offered to a deity in India, similarly the best fruit of Ireland was chosen to be offered to India. Offerings to the almighty have to be necessarily the best and Nivedita possessed a keen insight and sharp intellect. She touched the centre of all social problems at a very young age: education. Her experiments with education had their natural

continuance in India. She pioneered non-formal education. She literally begged from door to door to send girl students to her school in Calcutta.

---

**Nivedita is India. We need to know Nivedita to know India. Anyone even remotely connected with India or anything Indian needs to study Nivedita in depth.**

---

She was enthralled when she got her first girl student and thus sowed the humble beginnings of a great work, a work of inspiration that would lead to numerous such efforts to educate the girl-child.

Nivedita plunged to treat the sick. She clothed the distressed. She fought for innovation in Indian education. She fought for higher education in science in India. She strived to bring the Indian traditional thought in a harmonious synthesis with the Western thought in philosophy, humanities, sociology, and many other subjects that are taught in Indian universities. She sought to bring a unique way of representing Indian motifs in visual arts and influenced the pioneers of the reawakening of Indian art. She inspired numerous freedom fighters to give up concessionary politics and fight for complete freedom. This also was a natural continuance from her experiences at fighting for Home Rule in Ireland. She stood for women rights at a time when such attempts were practically unheard of in India.

Nivedita strived to protect Indian forests and to bring about a deep understanding of natural conservation in Indian minds. She wanted that all-renouncing monks take up the study of




sciences so that they could, through practice and precept, teach science to the masses. She created a flag for India. Though it was never adopted as the national flag, this flag, the vajra, best symbolises Nivedita's energy. She, Swamiji's offering in the female form, shakti, came upon India as a thunderbolt. Wherever she went, whoever she met, whatever she read, whatever she saw—all were encompassed with and entrenched in the thought of India. Her collaborations with Patrick Geddes were for India. Her meetings with Rabindranath Tagore were for India. Her sojourns to the Himalayas were for India. She lobbied with the rulers, dined with the ruled, and learnt at the feet of masters—all for the sake of India. She herself became India as a result. That is why she could turn the very course of the life of a great poet like Subramania Bharati. She turned him towards Kali, whom she had inherited from Swamiji. Bharati's life became transformed because of Nivedita.

Nivedita was passionately mad with the thought of India. The Indian cause occupied her body, mind, and spirit, till her passing away. That aggressive dedication is what we need to imbibe. We need to wander through lost lanes of history, dust its brittle pages, and unearth that undying dynamism. We need to be aggressive in social, philosophical, national, cultural, and spiritual life today. A sense of urgency to attain the goal is what characterises the lives of the great ones, especially the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, and Sister Nivedita. That urgency is much needed today. The comfort of complacency has never been the path of progress. Nivedita is India. We need to know Nivedita to know India. Anyone even remotely connected with India or anything Indian needs to study Nivedita in depth.

We need to acknowledge the vajra shakti, thunderbolt power, that Nivedita was. This power is speaking to us through its charges of brilliance even today through the numerous

women who are excelling in their pursuits. All of them have minuscule specks of Nivedita in them. The greater Nivedita has pervaded into so many smaller Niveditas. The best way to commemorate Nivedita would be to celebrate the excellence of women in no matter how small a venture. If an Indian woman writes well and with power, Nivedita writes through her. If an Indian woman displays her expertise in any of the performing arts, Nivedita performs through her. And, if an Indian woman educates naturally through her maternal instinct, Nivedita teaches through her.

The need of the hour is to critically analyse the writings of Sister Nivedita, especially her letters. It is unfortunate that till date, there is no comprehensive biography that covers her multi-dimensional personality. Though Nivedita was the truest offering ever possible, the age-old Indian orthodoxy has distanced Indian minds from her and has made them see her only as an outsider, who came to learn and help. To call Nivedita an outsider to India is to betray one's lack of patriotism. She is an outsider to India only as much Swamiji is.

Many Indian institutions of national importance like the Indian Institute of Science would never have seen the light of day but for Nivedita's untiring efforts. And yet, we have dismissed her as a forgotten figure, who is not even granted enough pages in history textbooks or studies. The postmodern penchant that haunts the aspiring intellectual has reduced many a national icon to a faint memory of no importance. It is a grave injustice to the cause of India that such is the fate of Nivedita's writings. If not anything more, her writings would bring the much-wanted sincerity in individual and public discourse that has plagued India and has forced its administrators to launch desperate drives to protect its sanctity. Nivedita calls upon us to try to know India. Through her, everyone can become a patriot of India irrespective of the country of birth. 



## ***Sister Nivedita***

**Swami Vireswarananda**

[Text of the address delivered by Srimat Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj, a disciple of Sri Sarada Devi, inaugurating the birth centenary celebrations of Sister Nivedita on 28 October 1967 at Mahajati Sadan, Calcutta. It was published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, 73/2 (February 1968), 49–50 and is being reprinted here—Editor.]

Srimat Swami Vireswaranandaji Maharaj was the tenth President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission.

**W**E ARE HERE TODAY to celebrate the birth centenary of a great soul who, though an alien, had made India her motherland and had dedicated herself to her service. The memorial raised to her in the laps of the Himalayas, where she breathed her last, 'Here reposes Sister Nivedita who gave her all to India' is literally true.

Born in Ireland, brought up in England, her

field of activity was in India; but through her life and work she belongs to the whole world. Her idealism and spirit of dedication have lifted her to the ranks of the eternal. Her parents were pious Christians and her mother had consecrated her at birth to the service of God. She too was endowed with the qualities of self-sacrifice and passion for Truth. It only needed the living touch of a great soul to set ablaze the latent fire of dedication in her. And this was what happened when she met Swami Vivekananda in London in 1895. In spite of her being on the guard not to be influenced by the magnetic personality of the 'Hindu Yogi' and her intensely independent nature, she was captivated by his nobility and loftiness of his life and teachings. The result was as she said later, 'I had recognized the heroic fibre of the man and desired to make myself the servant of his love for his own people'.

Sister Nivedita was a unique gift of Swami Vivekananda to India. A talented lady deeply rooted in Western culture and civilization was as it were uprooted from that soil by Swami Vivekananda and made to strike root in Indian culture and civilization. The metamorphosis was a painful one even to a brave heart like the Sister's but she did succeed in the end. Discipleship to this 'Master' and playing the role of a servant to India according to his vision was also no easy task. But he knew what he could expect from her and was not disappointed. The intense spiritual training she received under her *Guru's* supervision, the infinite trust he had in her, as also the blessing of the Holy Mother who accepted her and treated her as her own child, all these made the seemingly impossible possible. Thence-forward she dedicated herself to the cause of India in various ways. She inspired patriotism in the youth of India, and called upon them to dedicate their lives for the emancipation of India.

She worked for the education and uplift of Indian women and interpreted to the West Indian culture and ideals in various fields—in arts, education, social life, religion, religious symbology etc. through speeches and books like *Religion and Dharma*, *Web of Indian Life*, *Footfalls of Indian History*, *Siva and Buddha*, *Kālī the Mother*. She also influenced many great personalities of her time in India.

Nivedita was a born educator, endowed with the vision and qualities needed. She started a school for girls which has now blossomed into the Nivedita Girls' School. Besides she became instrumental to a great extent in laying the foundation for the development of 'national education' in India.

Her great qualities of head and heart and her versatile genius drew to her quite a number of leading personalities of the time in the field of art, literature, science, education, journalism and politics. Many she inspired and helped in their own fields. Her strength of character, her originality, and her kind heart and self-effacement evoked loving tributes from many. The most significant tribute was 'this radiant child of God'. It was her own innate purity coupled with the blessings of her *Guru* and the Holy Mother that transformed Margaret E Noble into this 'radiant child of God'.

In serving India to the best of her abilities she became convinced that political freedom was indispensable for the building of the nation. But she did not want to compromise the position of the Ramakrishna Order which had eschewed politics completely at the behest of its founder Swami Vivekananda. So in order to be fair both to herself and the Order she resigned from it thereby feeling free to work in the political field. She, however, maintained the spiritual bond. The brother disciples of Swamiji also maintained the same love and affection which they had for her



before her resignation. She continued to be one of them as before. The break was only from the organizational point for the safety of the Order and not in any other respect. This act of hers was misunderstood in some quarters by people who did not know the true story behind this decision of hers. It was no doubt very painful to her but she could realize that it was the only way to be faithful to herself and to the Order, which she loved so much.

Her politics was of an aggressive type and she had no patience with moderate politics of the petitionary type. Therefore, the Swadeshi movement had her full support. In spite of this view in politics she was a friend of the leaders of the different schools of politics, for she had realized that India had to be united if she was to achieve her freedom. It was her dream to see in India 'the great re-establishment of *Dharma*, when the whole of this nation shall be united together not in a common weakness, not in a common

misfortune or grievance, but in a great ever-living consciousness of the common nationality, common heritage ... '

Nivedita had her full share of trials and tribulations and had to lead an austere life. But she was, and had been, prepared for it. Swamiji had held before her the ideal of sacrifice in these words, 'Sacrifice in the past has been the law, it will be, alas, for ages to come.' Nivedita had accepted this ideal placed before her by her *Guru*, for we read in her book *Kālī the Mother*, 'Look for no mercy for thyself and I shall make thee bearer of great vessels of mercy to others. Accept bravely thine own darkness and thy lamp shall cheer many. Fulfil gladly the meanest service and leave high places unsought.'


May the life of this great dedicated soul inspire our youth in the service of our Motherland is my earnest prayer to Swami Vivekananda who gave in her this unique gift to our Motherland. 

Photo of Sister Nivedita's Birth Centenary Celebrations, Anandabazar Patrika, 29 October 1967





## ***Understanding India: Nivedita's Example***

**Swami Smaranananda<sup>1</sup>**

better. They think that life's values consist only in getting a half-digested education, enabling them to imitate Western customs and manners, without an understanding of either the East or the West. Here we are not concerned with the latter. But that it is necessary to understand India rightly if we want to serve her, is illustrated in Sister Nivedita's life of dedication, her training in the hands of her master, her life of an Indian nun, her deep study of the history, tradition, and values of India. Swami Vivekananda insisted that she should identify herself completely with India, make herself more Indian than Indians themselves, if she were to serve Indian women. And the disciple proved herself more than worthy. Hers was not a role of a mere social worker, serving Indian women as objects of pity. She tried to understand India's deeper values and urges by becoming a unit of the Indian milieu. In the words of Rabindranath Tagore: 'Because she had a comprehensive mind and extraordinary insight of love, she could see the creative ideals at work behind our social forms and discover our soul that has living connection with its past and is marching towards its fulfilment.' Tagore further draws attention to the fact that Nivedita, being an idealist, 'saw a great deal more than is usually seen by those foreigners who can only see things, but not truths' (1.245).

It is interesting to read how Swamiji trained Nivedita to bring about this understanding in

**A**H !', EXCLAIMED SWAMI VIVEKANANDA, when he heard of Sister Nivedita's visit to Gopaler Ma, 'that is the old India that you have seen, the India of prayers and tears, of vigils and fasts, that is passing away, never to return.'<sup>2</sup> The old India may pass away, never to return, but nevertheless, the need to understand old India in the context of the new, so as to serve her, cannot be overemphasised.

This fact is not fully appreciated even by many well-meaning, thoughtful modern men and women in this country who wish to serve her. And of the educated rabble, the less said the

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her. He was never tired of telling his disciples that, to understand anything rightly, one must look at it from its own point of view with sympathetic eyes. During 1898, Nivedita accompanied Swamiji in his journeys through northern India, to Almora and Kashmir. Everywhere Swamiji painted glorious pictures of India's past: of ancient Pataliputra, hoary traditions of Varanasi, of Buddha's youth and renunciation in the foothills of the Himalayas. At Almora, Nivedita studied the Bhagavadgita under Swami Swarupananda, a prominent disciple of Swamiji. It was here that Swamiji put Nivedita to a rigorous test. Speaking of this period, she says: 'My relation to our Master at this time can only be described as one of clash and conflict. I can see now how much there was to learn, and how short was the time for learning to be, and the first of lessons, doubtless, is the destruction of self-sufficiency in the mind of the taught. But I had been little prepared for that constant rebuke and attack upon all my most cherished prepossessions which was now my lot' (1.79–80). But this phase was not to last long. An evening came when Swamiji changed his attitude and blessed his disciple heartily and brought peace. The period of turmoil was a necessary condition for shattering many pre-conceived notions and put herself in the position of a disciple, ready to understand India in its proper perspective, and make herself a fit instrument for India's service. Nivedita's education in the hands of her master was rightly in accord with the injunction of the Gita: 'Know that by prostrating yourself by questions, and by service; the wise, those who have realised the Truth, will instruct thee in knowledge.'<sup>3</sup>

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In her research into India's heritage and customs and manners, Sister Nivedita did not merely scratch at the surface. She endeavoured to study the deeper urges of the Indian mind that have

moulded her destiny through the ages, the urges that had withstood the onslaught of foreign hordes and had stood the test of time. A glance at Nivedita's writings can reveal how she entered into the Indian mind.

Talking of India's history, she says: 'India as she stands is only to be explained by the history of India. The future waits, for us to create it out of the materials left us by the past, aided by our understanding of this our inheritance.'<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a clear grasp of our past is a *sine qua non* for a clearer grasp of our present-day problems. Indian history, as it is available to us in books, is often distorted, though attempts are afoot since independence to bring out an Indian history of India. Nivedita, therefore, feels the need for travel. The ancient monuments that lie scattered over the length and breadth of the land offer interesting clues to our past. And what we see today is only a small fraction of what time and invaders have left undestroyed.

A study of these monuments reveals, according to Nivedita, one of the master facts of Indian history—that India is and always has been a synthesis. The Vedantic base of Indian life is mainly instrumental in providing her a syncretic outlook. Thus most of the foreigners who came to India made this country their home ultimately and became a drop in this vast ocean of humanity. This was possible because ancient India always believed in learning and absorbing. She could melt the alien influence in her own crucible and give it a shape of her own. India was vigorous as long as this characteristic of hers ran through her activities like a thread through a garland. In the words of Nivedita: 'We have to recognise India herself all-containing, all-dominating, moulding, and shaping the destinies and the very nature of the elements out of which she is composed. The Indian people may be defective in the methods of mechanical organisation, but



they have been lacking, as a people, in none of the essentials of organic synthesis' (1.13).

Though great monuments sprang up in large numbers in post Buddhistic India, in her earlier period of long civilised history, she put her powers 'into the dreams and philosophy of the Upanishads'. And what can be a better means of preserving our ancient heritage than through words, the repository of human thought in spite of their ephemeral character? We find today that the devastation to our historic monuments could not efface from the face of the nation the thought current set in motion by the Vedas and

the Upanishads. In the modern world, the most ancient books of the world—the Upanishads—are read and sought after by intellectuals everywhere. Therefore, Nivedita says: 'Indian students will do most to help the growth of knowledge if they begin [the study of India's history] with the robust conviction that in the long tale of their Motherland there can be nothing to cause them anything but pride and reverence' (4.19).

Nivedita was aware that, if a nation wants to progress, she has to learn from others, too. While keeping the essentials intact, the non-essentials that may be unwanted accretions to the national

mind will have be brushed aside. Swamiji had pointed out that India's degeneration began on that day when she invented the word *mleccha* for foreigners and shut herself away from the outside world. A harmonious fusion of the best in the East and West was what was needed by India.

Nivedita knew that India's contribution in the past to world's culture and civilisation was not sufficient to keep her alive. She must be conscious of her individuality in the present time and renew herself for bringing forth new blossoms in all walks of life; otherwise, she would disappear like ancient Egypt and Greece, Judea, and Rome. Reflecting in this wise, she writes: 'To give a religion to the world may be a sufficient proof that one's past was not in vain, but evidently it is no sort of safeguard for the future. ... The orthodox is apt to tread the round of his own past eternally. The unorthodox is as apt to harness himself to the foreign present, with an equal blindness. In suicidal desperation, the would-be patriotic reiterate the war





cries of antagonistic sects, or moan for the advent of a new religion, as if by introducing a fifth element of discord, the Indian peoples could reach unity. Nor does the education at present offered, promise any solution of the problem' (2.234).

Thus Nivedita called upon Indians to put forth new enthusiasm in regenerating the country. And she outlined the task in words of transparent clarity: 'Our task is to translate ancient knowledge into modern equivalents. We have to clothe the old strength in a new form. The new form *without* that old strength is nothing but a mockery: almost equally foolish is the savage anachronism of an old-time power without fit expression. Spiritually, intellectually, there is no undertaking, but we must attempt it' (3.502).

### III

Today we have come a long way off from the conditions that existed in Nivedita's time. The struggles of the early decades of this century have borne fruit as political independence. But, perhaps owing to our many commissions and omissions, we are struggling for our place in a narrow world that has seen two world wars since Nivedita's time. And the problems we face today are, in a sense, more acute than in her time.

All right-thinking Indians have to give thought to these questions: What ails us today? Why are we so dependent on other countries economically? How can we make our voice felt in a highly competitive world? Is it by ignoring our past that we can progress or through a proper understanding of the past, present, and the future of the country? What should be our guidelines for steering our course across these troubled waters? We can answer these questions to a great extent by studying Nivedita's approach to India's problems. And we must remember that Nivedita's ideas were moulded in the fiery furnace of her master's life and teachings.

Today's crisis in India may be termed as a 'crisis of values'. Our problems on the economic, political, and social levels can all be traced to this one cause. A nation reflects its philosophy in its various aspects of life. But what is our philosophy today? Social values are in a melting pot, while there is a spiritual vacuum. The high ideals that characterised our leadership in the beginning of this century raised high hopes in many a heart of a full-fledged renaissance in all walks of life. But one now feels as if the flower of renaissance has withered before it fully blossomed.

India's political struggles and social upheavals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were rooted in its past and were yet modern. To blend harmoniously the best of both the worlds—the East and the West—was the slogan of the day. But what do we find today? It looks as if we are tired after the first round of the battle is won. There is an all-round lack of enthusiasm, of inertia. Young and old alike look to others to solve their problems, while those who are piloting the ship of the state, harp on old-time slogans with little relevance to current problems. But what Nivedita said fifty years back greatly applies to us even today: 'The Indian mind has not reached out to conquer and possess its own land as its inalienable share and trust, in the world as a whole. It has been content, even in things modern, to take obediently whatever was given to it. And the newness and the strangeness of the thing given has dazed it. The Indian people as a whole for the last two generations have been as men walking in a dream, without manhood, without power to react freely against conditions, without even commonsense' (20).

What is needed today is fresh thinking. A new leadership, not afraid to think anew and not forgetting older values that have preserved our individuality all these thousands of years is the need of the moment. And this new thinking has to be constructive. The problem now is not

fighting against an alien power, but struggling against our own defects. The educated Indian, the affluent Indian has to understand that the values of selflessness and love of truth are the very basis for serving the nation. The moment we attained political independence, most of us have started thinking in terms of reaping its benefits as early as possible, at the cost of others, instead of understanding that the real struggle to make the nation self-sufficient lies ahead. The result is that plans and projects, however wonderful they may appear on paper, fail to materialise into reality or at the most remain poor imitations of Western models, worked inefficiently, proving themselves a drain on the nation's resources.

We might have succeeded in our age of revolt and political struggles, but we have not yet proved ourselves equal to our task in this age of construction. Constructive work needs the very values of *shraddha* and sacrifice which Swami Vivekananda stressed. Today it appears that *tamas*—inertia—has once again come over the land as a dark cloud. The young man vainly searches for a higher ideal in life, by working out which he can obtain a sense of fulfilment. But alas! He can only imitate the film stars or be a victim to some latest fad imported from the West! This state of affairs must change if India has to go ahead as a nation.

And to bring about the change, the young men and women of this country must acquaint themselves with the values of renunciation and sacrifice that have sustained this nation for five thousand years. In their ears must ring once again the voice of Swami Vivekananda:

O India! With this mere echoing of others, with this base imitation of others, with this dependence on others, this slavish weakness, this vile detestable cruelty—wouldst thou, with these provisions only, scale the highest pinnacle of civilisation and greatness? ... O India; Forget

not that the idea of thy womanhood is Sita, Savitri, Damayanti; forget not that the God thou worshipping is the great Ascetic of ascetics, the all-renouncing Shankara, the Lord of Uma; forget not that thy marriage, thy wealth, thy life are not for sense-pleasure, are not for thy individual personal happiness; forget not that thou art born as a sacrifice to the Mother's altar; forget not that thy social order is but the reflex of the Infinite Universal Motherhood; forget not that the lower classes, the ignorant, the poor, the illiterate, the cobbler, the sweeper, are thy flesh and blood, thy brothers. Thou brave one, be bold, take courage, be proud that thou art an Indian, and proudly proclaim, 'I am an Indian, every Indian is my brother'.<sup>5</sup>

Today, while we pay our homage to a martyr in the cause of India, a lioness who sprang from the ruler's country to arouse the vitality of young India and worked with a deep understanding of her institutions, let us bestir ourselves to action—action that makes less noise, but works silently, yet sincerely, and steadily. And let us pray in the words of the Upanishadic Rishi:

*Asato ma sad gamaya;  
Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya;  
Mrityor ma amritam gamaya.*

Lead forth  
From untruth to Truth,  
From darkness to Light,  
From death to Immortality.



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## ***Holy Mother and Sister Nivedita***

**Swami Chetanananda**

**H**OLY MOTHER'S LIFE is a meeting point of the ancient and the modern. She was born in a rural Indian village in the nineteenth century, and she passed away in twentieth-century Calcutta. Later in life she conducted Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual ministry,

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Swami Chetanananda is the minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society of St Louis.

advised his disciples and devotees, entertained the Western women who visited Swami Vivekananda, asked her disciples to learn English, and encouraged the girls to have a modern education. The Master taught her to adjust according to time, place, and person.

In Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna had a vision that he described to Holy Mother: 'I was in the land of the white people. Their skin is white,

their hearts are white and they are simple and sincere. It is a very beautiful country. I think I shall go there.’<sup>1</sup> Later when Swamiji and other disciples went to the West to spread Vedanta and the universal message of Sri Ramakrishna, some Western women helped them immensely, which Swamiji acknowledged profusely. He observed that one of the causes of prosperity in the West was education for both men and women, whereas women were neglected in India. He remarked: ‘A bird cannot fly with only one wing.’<sup>2</sup> Both men and women are necessary to build a successful nation. Swamiji engaged Nivedita to educate Indian women.

Holy Mother’s relationship with Nivedita was sweet and touching, yet awe-inspiring. From the very beginning, Nivedita occupied a special place in Holy Mother’s heart. During Nivedita’s first visit to Holy Mother, Swamiji was a bit apprehensive: Holy Mother had been born and brought up in an orthodox brahmana family in a village. Western etiquette was unfamiliar to her, and she did not know English. How would she receive his Western disciples? Swamiji sent his disciple Swami Swarupananda as an interpreter. When he introduced Nivedita to Holy Mother, she asked her name. Nivedita replied, ‘My name is Miss Margaret Elizabeth Noble.’

Swarupananda translated Holy Mother’s

*Pravrajika Bharatiprana*  
(1894–1973)



Bengali: ‘My child, I shall not be able to utter such a long name. I will call you *khuki* [baby].’

Nivedita said joyfully, ‘Yes, yes, I am Mother’s baby.’

She then went to Swamiji and said: ‘Mother blessed me touching my head, allowed me to bow

down touching her feet, offered prasada, and she would call me “*khuki*.”

Swamiji was overjoyed.

Nivedita began to learn Bengali from Swarupananda so that she could speak with Holy Mother directly.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning, despite Golap-ma’s opposition, Holy Mother kept Nivedita in her residence at 10/2 Bosepara Lane so that she could teach Nivedita Hindu manners and customs. She ate her meals with Nivedita and encouraged her activities (533).

Afterwards Nivedita moved to 16 Bosepara Lane and started a school for girls at Swamiji’s request. On 13 November 1898 Holy Mother inaugurated the school, saying: ‘May the Divine Mother of the Universe bless the school. May the girls trained here be ideals for society.’

Almost every day Nivedita would visit Holy Mother and take the dust of her feet. Every Sunday she would come to clean Holy Mother’s room by dusting the bed, sweeping the floor, and polishing the glass panes in the doors and windows. Nivedita had taken up this work as her important duty. She was eager to provide even the smallest convenience or comfort to Mother (147).

Nivedita did not have much money, but she wanted to buy things for Holy Mother. She was mainly supported by Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod.

On 24 February 1904 Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod, after Holy Mother had returned to Calcutta from a visit to Jayrambati: ‘The Holy Mother is here, so small, so thin, so dark, worn out physically I should say, with village hardship and village life. But the same clear mind—the same stateliness, the same womanhood, as before. Oh, how many comforts I would like to take her! She needs a soft pillow—a shelf—a rug, so many things. She is so crowded with people about her always. I would like to give her a beautiful picture, a piece of bright colour. But



I suppose one must wait. Meanwhile, there is not a change in her.’<sup>4</sup> This is the sign of genuine love. A lover wants to give her or his beloved all the best things to make the beloved happy, and thus the lover gets the maximum happiness.

Sarala, later Pravrajika Bharatiprana, was a student of Nivedita’s school. She recalled a memorable visit of Sister Nivedita to Holy Mother in Udbodhan house:

After the Mother’s return from Jayrambati, one afternoon Sister Sudhira and I went to see her in Udbodhan house. Sister Sudhira remarked: ‘Mother, you have become very dark and lean.’ ‘Our village is in open fields, you know,’ the Mother replied, ‘and so the complexion becomes dark. In addition, I had to work hard there.’ Meanwhile, Sister Nivedita came, bowed down to the Mother, and took her seat.

Whenever Sister Nivedita visited the Mother, I saw the Sister seated absorbed for a long time in front of the Mother. She would bow down to the Mother with full prostration and an indescribable wave of bliss would flow over her entire face. It seemed a joyful child closely looking at the face of her or his Mother. Once the Mother presented the Sister a palm-leaf fan with woolen lace around, which she made herself. Having that fan from the Mother’s hand, she was beside herself and exclaimed, ‘This fan has been made by Matadevi [Holy Mother] and she has given it to me.’ This she repeated again and again and touched that fan with her head and chest. And to those who were present there, including myself, the Sister touched that fan to their heads. Observing her exuberant joy, the Mother remarked: ‘Do you see how Nivedita is thrilled having this trivial thing? Ah, how simple she is and what deep faith she has—as if she is a Goddess! How much devotion she has for Naren! Because he is born in this country, she left her home and family and has come to do his work with her heart and soul. What a devotion to the guru! And what love for this country!’

One day Nivedita told us that Holy Mother would visit our school, and we should enjoy the festive occasion. She was anxiously running to and fro like a little girl. Holy Mother’s carriage arrived in the afternoon instead of morning. Radhu, Golap-ma, and others were with her. As soon as she got down from the carriage, Nivedita prostrated to her and led her to the prayer hall. She gave us flowers to be offered at Holy Mother’s feet. The Mother asked the girls to sing a little. They did so and recited a poem composed by the poet Saralabala Sarkar. The Holy Mother listened to it and appreciated the poem. Then she took a little sweet and asked to distribute the prasada to us. Afterwards Nivedita took the Mother around and showed her the whole house, the handicrafts of the girls. The Mother was very pleased and remarked: ‘The girls have learned well.’ Later Nivedita took the Mother to her own room for rest.

It was due to her acquaintance with Holy Mother that Nivedita developed an exalted opinion of Indian womanhood. One day by the by Swami Saradananda said: ‘After all, our women are ignorant and unlettered.’ Nivedita interrupted him immediately and forcefully contradicted him, saying: ‘The women of India are by no means ignorant. In that country—referring to the United Kingdom—has one ever heard such words of wisdom from women as one does here?’<sup>5</sup>

One day Nivedita and Sister Christine visited Holy

*Sister Nivedita and  
Saralabala Sarkar (1875–1961)*



Mother. Nivedita said in Bengali: '*Matridevi, apni hon amadiger Kali*; Mother, you are our Kali.' Christine repeated in English: 'Oh, Holy Mother is our Kali.' At this, Holy Mother said with a laugh: 'No, my children, I can't be Kali or any such thing—I would have to stick out my tongue!'

When this was translated to them, they said: 'No, you won't have to take that trouble. We shall regard you as our Mother Kali; Sri Ramakrishna is our Shiva.'

Holy Mother said with a smile: 'Well, that might be alright.' Then they left after taking the dust of her feet.<sup>6</sup>

A disciple expressed his wonder to Holy Mother as he saw people coming from the West to see her. Holy Mother responded: 'The Master once said in an ecstatic mood: "In course of time I will be worshipped in many homes. Innumerable indeed will be my devotees." Nivedita once said to me: "Mother, we were Hindus in our previous birth. We are born in the West so that the Master's message may spread there."<sup>7</sup>

In 1900 when Nivedita went to the US to collect funds for her school, Holy Mother dictated a letter to her that Saradananda translated into English. Here is an excerpt from that letter:

My dear, love to you, baby daughter Nivedita, I am so glad to learn you have prayed to the Lord for my eternal peace. You are a manifestation of the ever-blissful Mother. I look at your photo, which is with me, every now and then and it seems as if you are present with me. I long for the day and the year when you shall return. May the prayers you have uttered for me from the heart of your pure virgin soul be answered! I am well and happy. I always pray to the Lord that He might help you in your noble efforts and keep you strong and happy. I pray too for your quick return. May He fulfil your desires about the women's home in India and may that would-be home fulfil its mission in teaching true dharma to all.

He, the Breath of the Universe, is singing His own praise and you are hearing that eternal song through things that will come to an end. The trees, the birds, the hills and all are singing praise to the Lord. The Banyan of Dakshineswar sings of Kali to be sure, and blessed is he who has ears to hear it. ...

My dear love to you and blessings and prayers for your spiritual growth. You are doing good work indeed. But do not forget your Bengali, else I will not be able to understand you when you come back. It gave me such a delight to learn that you are speaking of Dhruva, Savitri, Sita, Rama and so on there. The accounts of their holy lives are better than all the vain talk of the world, I am sure. Oh! How beautiful are the Name and doings of the Lord!

Your, Mother.<sup>8</sup>

Holy Mother bestowed her grace on Nivedita and remarked: 'Her outside is white and inside is white [meaning pure].' Nivedita wrote about her:

I first realised this gift in the Holy Mother, on the occasion of a visit that she paid us in recent years, on the afternoon of a certain Easter Day. Before that, probably, I had always been too much absorbed, when with her, in striving to learn what she represented, to think of observing her in the contrary position. On this particular occasion, however, after going over our whole house, the Mother and her party expressed a desire to rest in the chapel, and hear something of the meaning of the Christian festival. This was followed by Easter music, and singing, with our small French organ. And in the swiftness of her comprehension, and the depth of her sympathy with these resurrection-hymns, unimpeded by any foreignness or unfamiliarity in them, we saw revealed for the first time, one of the most impressive aspects of the great religious culture of Sarada Devi. The same power is seen to a certain extent, in all the women about her, who were touched by the hand of Sri Ramakrishna. But in her, it has all the strength and certainty of some high and arduous form of scholarship.

The same trait came out again, one evening, when, in the midst of her little circle, the Holy Mother asked my Gurubhagini [Christine] and myself, to describe to her a European wedding. With much fun and laughter, personating now the 'Christian Brahmin', and again the bride and bridegroom, we complied. But we were neither of us prepared for the effect of the marriage vow. ...

'For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health,—till death us do part,' were words that drew exclamations of delight from all about us. But none appreciated them as did the Mother. Again and again she had them repeated to her. 'Oh the Dharmmik words! the righteous words!' she said.<sup>9</sup>

Holy Mother treasured anything that Nivedita gave her. Once Nivedita had given Holy Mother a small German-silver box in which she kept locks of Ramakrishna's hair. She used to say, 'Whenever I look at the box at the time of worship, I am reminded of Nivedita.' In one of her trunks Holy Mother kept an old tattered silk scarf that her attendant wanted to throw away. 'No, child', she said. 'Nivedita gave it to me with great love. Let us preserve it.' She then took the scarf in hand, scattered black cumin seeds—which act like moth balls—in its folds as a preservative, and laid it carefully back in the trunk. She remarked: 'The very sight of the scarf reminds me of Nivedita. What a wonderful girl she was! At first she could not speak to me directly, and the boys acted as interpreters. Later she picked up the Bengali language. She loved my mother very much.'

One day Nivedita said to Shyamasundari: 'Grandma, I shall go to your village and cook in your kitchen.' The old lady replied at once: 'No, my child, you must not do that. Our people will ostracise me if you enter my kitchen.'<sup>10</sup>

Nivedita had penetrating eyes, a brilliant mind, indomitable energy, and deep spirituality. She observed that although Holy Mother had no

formal education, her dealings with people and her teachings were beautiful, catholic, practical, and appealing. Holy Mother's divine love and affection, strong commonsense, and sweet personality captivated her. Nivedita wrote:

To me it has always appeared that she is Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood. But is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of new? In her one sees realised that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may attain. And yet, to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood. I have never known her hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgement, however new and complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer. Her whole experience is of the theocratic civilisation. Yet she rises to the height of every situation. Is she tortured by the perversity of any about her? The only sign is a strange and quiet intensity that comes upon her. Does one carry to her some perplexity or mortification born of social developments beyond her ken? With unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter, and sets the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty.<sup>11</sup>

When Nivedita died in Darjeeling on 13 October 1911, Holy Mother shed tears and said: 'What sincere devotion Nivedita had! She never considered anything too much that she might do for me. She often came to me at night. Seeing that light struck my eyes, she put a shade of paper around the lamp. She would prostrate herself before me with great tenderness and take the dust of my feet with her handkerchief. I felt that she hesitated even to touch my feet.' As the women devotees present expressed their sorrow at Nivedita's death, Holy Mother said: 'All creatures cry for a great soul.'<sup>12</sup>


A few days after Nivedita's death, Sister Christine and Sister Sudhira [a co-worker] came to see Holy Mother from Nivedita School. Remembering the close relationship between Nivedita and

Christine, Holy Mother said to Sudhira: 'Ah, they lived together. Now it will be hard for her to live alone.' She then consoled Christine: 'Our hearts are crying for her, and undoubtedly your feeling will be more intense, my child. What a wonderful person she was! So many people are now crying for her.'<sup>13</sup> Saying so, Holy Mother wept. Then she asked Christine about the activities of the school.

One day the Mother was resting on her bed and several women devotees were near her. Someone began to talk about Jesus Christ. The Mother got up and saluted Lord Jesus with folded hands. She then said:

I heard many things about Jesus Christ from Nivedita. She read out many beautiful stories about him to me. Aha, Jesus came to deliver people in this world and how much sufferings he had to undergo. He joyfully endured all. Despite all those persecutions, he loved people and forgave them unconditionally. His own disciple betrayed him. Aha, they killed him nailing at his hands, feet and chest. In spite of that terrible torture and pain, he ungrudgingly forgave them. He prayed to God for not taking their offence. Is it possible for human beings to have such love, power of forbearance, and forgiveness? Who can endure this way other than God? God came as Jesus to teach divine love to the people of the world.

Look at Nivedita, a Western girl, came to our country and worked happily forbearing insult and harassment; and also enduring so much discomfort she tried to educate our children. When she visited some homes to get their children for her school, she was humiliated; some did not allow her to go inside their homes; and some allowed her to get in but later purified the place by sprinkling Ganges water. She saw everything but did not mind. She left the place with a smiling face. There was no bounden necessity for her to educate the girls of our country by enduring such insult and ill-treatment and ruining her life little by little. You see, my daughter Nivedita had such a wonderful mind that she took over the

responsibility to teach our girls on her own shoulder, because her guru Naren wanted and asked her to do it. She did not care for physical suffering and discomfort, insult and incivility of our people. For whom she dedicated her life, they treated her contemptuously. Under such circumstances, could the women of our country sacrifice such a great extent for the sake of their guru? They would say, 'We don't care!' So I say that except the Master no one knows or understands how, when, what, and through whom he makes one work.<sup>14</sup> 

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# ***Sister Nivedita and Swami Swarupananda***

**Swami Atmajnanananda**

THERE ARE CERTAIN TIMES in the history of the world when the paths of two seemingly very different individuals from different parts of the world and with radically different backgrounds cross, and the result of this meeting of souls is a wonderful new trajectory for at least one of them, if not both. Such was the case with a young woman, born in Ireland on 28 October 1867 and given the name Margaret Elizabeth Noble, and a young man of Kolkata, named Ajay Hari Bandyopadhyay, born just four years later in 1871. Through the magic touch of Swami Vivekananda, each was transformed, each gave up the ordinary pleasures of the world for the treasures of spiritual life, and each played a very critical role in the history of the Ramakrishna Order. The future Sister Nivedita met Swamiji first and was well-tested by him before receiving the blessing of brahmacharya vows on 25 March 1898 in India. As chance would have it, the future Swami Swarupananda received his first vows on 29 March, a mere four days later, after spending but a few short weeks with Swamiji. Somehow, Swamiji knew that the lives of these two very special disciples of his would intersect, and that the fruits that would come from their interaction would lead to the greatest good for each individually, and for the movement as a whole.

It was not the practice of Swamiji to dabble in the supernatural, or to read the future of

his disciples. It is not that he was incapable of such divine insight and, indeed, used to say that the guru knows the past, present, and future of the disciple. Rather, he had a great dislike for anything that had the slightest suggestion of the occult or gave even the appearance of the mysterious. Nevertheless, when we examine his dealings with his many disciples and followers, especially the two under consideration here, we cannot help but feel that he recognised and understood their future roles and activities, and did everything he could to facilitate their growth and development so that they could reach their full potential. And in the case of Sister Nivedita and Swami Swarupananda, that meant giving a tremendous amount of responsibility to Swami Swarupananda, particularly as the mentor and guide for Nivedita, and allowing Sister Nivedita to grow and mature under his guidance in a way she could not have done under Swamiji himself, or on her own.

Why do we make the assumption that Swamiji knew the future role Swami Swarupananda was to play in the Order even at their first meeting? It is partly because of the great joy that Swamiji felt when they met for the first time. But more particularly, it is as if he somehow knew Swarupananda's life was to be short and his contributions crucial to his work. And as we shall see, he played an extremely valuable role in the founding of Mayavati Ashrama in the Himalayas, in the development of the periodical *Prabuddha Bharata*, in the first translation of the *Bhagavadgita* by a monk of the Ramakrishna

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Order, and most importantly for our purposes, as the teacher and guide for Sister Nivedita in the Bengali language, manners and customs of India, and even in the practice of meditation and other spiritual disciplines.

### Swami Swarupananda

Ajay Hari grew up in a pious Vaishnava family and was imbued with the virtues of devotion, humility, and simplicity, as well as a great thirst for knowledge. He had a special passion for the Sanskrit language and became quite proficient in it, even starting a school for Sanskrit and Vedic learning with his friend Satishchandra Mukherjee. Together they also started a monthly magazine called 'Dawn', which was quite influential in the fields of national education as well as the freedom movement. Several incidents in his childhood made his mind turn inward in the search for answers to the hidden mysteries of the universe and the problem of suffering in the world. Eventually, his marriage was arranged, but as was often the case, he continued to live at his parent's home maintaining his practice of brahmacharya. Despite now being married, somehow his feeling of renunciation and his thirst for spiritual fulfillment only increased as he got older. It is interesting to note that we have some inkling of the state of his mind only because he revealed it to Sister Nivedita later when she was his student, and she recorded it in some of her writings. Perhaps



Swami Swarupananda (1871–1906)

her curiosity got the best of her at times, but we have to be grateful for that curiosity of Sister Nivedita's, for we otherwise would know very little about Swami Swarupananda. We read in *The Master as I Saw Him*: 'Two or three such experiences precipitated him upon a year of mental suffering so keen that he never again knew perfect health. But he emerged from it in the peace that comes of a settled attitude towards life. *He would break the dream.* In other words, he had reached the conclusion that thousands of Indian students have arrived at, both before and since the time of Buddha.'<sup>1</sup>

### First Meeting with Swami Swarupananda

Swamiji knew that Sister Nivedita would need a great deal of training—both in Bengali and in the customs of India—if she was to succeed in her mission of starting a school for girls in India. He also knew that he himself was not the one to do it, not only because of restraints of time but also of temperament. It would require a young monk with infinite patience and understanding, and Swamiji knew in his heart that the new monk, the future Swarupananda, was perfect for the job. And so, shortly after Nivedita's arrival in India, Swamiji sent Ajay Hari to Sister Nivedita to begin her first lessons in Bengali. We can imagine Sister Nivedita's reaction when she saw the young man, dressed in the white cloth of a brahmachari, his head shaven except for the tuft of hair on top. Not accustomed to foreign ladies,

Ajay Hari was shy and a bit clumsy. He removed his shoes at the door and waited patiently for Nivedita to come. Too shy to even look at her, Ajay Hari placed two small books on the table in her room. Sister Nivedita was equally out of her element in the presence of the shy, young monk. She glanced at the books, both in Bengali but with the English title, *Our Lord's Sayings*. At first Nivedita was confused. Perhaps she had never heard Sri Ramakrishna referred to in such language. She wondered, 'Whose words are these? Who is being referred to by "Our Lord"?' All of her life, that phrase had been reserved for Jesus Christ. Could they perhaps refer to Sri Krishna, as well? She expressed her confusion to Ajay in an obvious state of extreme embarrassment, and he, equally perplexed regarding her confusion, replied quietly, 'Our Lord Sri Ramakrishna'. The books, he explained, were to be translated into English as soon as possible: a daunting task for one who knew at that time a few words of Bengali at the most.

Nivedita quickly began to feel at ease with the young monk and soon peppered him with questions. Unaware of the custom not to ask sadhus about their pre-monastic life, Nivedita could not control her curiosity about Ajay. She knew about his earlier days as a married man with children, about his overwhelming doubts regarding the life he had chosen and the life of a monk that presented itself to him, and most importantly about his meeting with Swamiji. With tremendous patience and understanding, he answered all of the questions put to him, finally explaining to her that her task at hand was not to ask a hundred and one questions, but to learn enough Bengali to at least communicate with the local people. He explained that she should focus on those everyday expressions which would make the people of Calcutta consider her their very own and endear them to her. Sister Nivedita

blushed at this very kind and mild rebuke and agreed that it was indeed time for them to start their work.

### **Swami Swarupananda's Sannyasa Ceremony**

It was a mere four days after this first meeting that Swamiji initiated Ajay Hari into the life of *sannyasa*, giving him the name Swarupananda. Even in those days, when there were no strict rules regarding the novitiate period before the taking of final vows, it was an unusually short waiting period. Part of Swamiji's eagerness to grant him *sannyasa* was due to the wonderful qualities of this young man. He himself proclaimed that to get an efficient worker like Swarupananda was 'a greater gain than to receive thousands of gold coins!' Perhaps, as suggested earlier, Swamiji also knew that Swarupananda would not live long and that he had a very important role to play in the Ramakrishna Movement. He immediately entrusted him with the position of first President of Advaita Ashrama, ultimately to be in Mayavati, the task of editing the *Prabuddha Bharata*, of working on a new translation of the *Bhagavadgita*, and, of course, teaching Nivedita Bengali. This latter task really went far beyond the academic nature of the classes and included invaluable teachings in Indian culture and spiritual life. It is significant to note that once all of these tasks had been completed, Swami Swarupananda left this earthly realm at the young age of thirty-four, confirming perhaps Swamiji's intuition that his time would be short and his work immensely valuable.

### **The Period of Training**

Since Swarupananda was to take up his new post as the President of Advaita Ashrama, it was decided that Nivedita would accompany him to Almora—the home of the ashrama before

shifting to Mayavati—along with Josephine MacLeod and Sara Bull. The Seviars were already there to greet the travellers. Swamiji himself was also staying in Almora at the time. For Nivedita, it was a period of great joy as well as equally great sorrow. The beauty of Almora was almost overwhelming and the cottage where they stayed had a breathtaking view of the Himalayas. But Swamiji himself seemed distant, and Nivedita felt a great emptiness. We read in *The Dedicated* by Lizelle Reymond:

Almora seemed to be such a place as heart and soul have dreamed of: a place where the spirit's joyous dreams come true. Yet Nivedita felt herself suddenly seized with an indescribable feeling of grief, and plunged into such solitude that, for a moment, her spirit wavered. She could not see the sun or the mountains or the deep valleys stretching in the distance. She did not dare look within herself, or raise her eyes to her guru. For four days she was sunk in a sorrow that she could not understand. And then she recognized its cause: her guru had withdrawn from her.<sup>2</sup>

The saving grace for Nivedita at this time was Swami Swarupananda. Together they continued their study of the *Bhagavadgita*, which was to be Swarupananda's project for the *Prabuddha Bharata*. With great patience and understanding, he instructed her in meditation and equanimity of mind. Since he was of an extremely meditative nature, he would often give his best teachings in silence. The swami could sense when Nivedita felt dejected. At such times he would go to the nearby forest with her and sit in meditation beneath a tree, while Sister Nivedita would soak up the calmness of mind of the swami and feel comforted. Sometimes the periods of silence would last several hours at a stretch.

What Sister Nivedita gained by the company of Swami Swarupananda was enormous, especially in light of her struggles to understand the seeming indifference of her guru, Swami

Vivekananda, who was trying his utmost to teach Nivedita detachment. But Swarupananda also gained much from the company of Nivedita. Aside from the help she gave him regarding articles for the magazine, probably there were things he could confide in her that he might have kept from others. The sweetness of their relationship and the intimacy of their friendship can be seen in the letters Swarupananda wrote to Nivedita while he was the president of Advaita Ashrama. One is especially touching, as it was written at a time of great famine in parts of India. We can see how freely Swarupananda could express his innermost feeling to Nivedita in the following unpublished letter:

I am living amidst pain, suffering and sacrifice—and those of the severest kind. Three millions of people were shown by Govt. returns last week to be on Relief Works in the whole of India, which means they get food of the poorest kind once a day in return for a whole day's work. The magnitude of the famine is terrible. The Mother has assumed the most fearful death-dealing form and her long shadow has fallen upon Rajputana, Central Provinces, Gujarat and other places. You can easily imagine what terrible havoc the famine is doing among people who can hardly get food twice a day when they are at their best, if I tell you that it has *not* rained for the last three years in these parts—and consequently the ground has hardly yielded anything—for Rajputana is more or less a desert all over. Add to this three years chronic scarcity, the complete failure of the present year's crops and the rigours of a severely cold season and you will have an idea how the Mother's own handmaids Pain, Suffering and Sacrifice are having a jolly time of it.

We can also see in the same letter how Swarupananda was able to answer the most intricate questions Nivedita had regarding the subtleties of spiritual life and practice:




In the moment of the exaltation of the will the 'body' feeling is submerged and with it pain and sacrifice. When a boy I heard how in the times when the self-immolation of widows in their husband's funeral pyre was allowed, a lady of the family wanted to burn her body together with that of her dead husband she was persuaded by all manner of means not to do so but in vain. Her effective reply was to light a lamp and thrust one of her fingers in it and hold it there till it was burnt—Then she came out and showed what she had done and thus extorted permission to destroy herself with her husband's corpse. No doubt it was heroic and to my boyish imagination it was grand. But as you say the love of pain *is* morbid, as the love of its opposite is foolish. But then there is something more heroic still—the taking of pain and pleasure evenly. If one looks beneath the surface one would see the body is sacrificed to the will. But the will remains to be sacrificed to the Spirit—to that evenness of view—the house of the soul—which is never unbalanced by waves or storms from without; and if stuck to and held on with determination is soon found out to be superior to all circumstances. As the will for its own pleasure engages the body sometimes to acts which give pleasure to the body in the same manner, with the identical object, it makes the body to suffer. The will, not consonant with the ever-balanced Spirit is a tyrant, *en rapport* with the Spirit it is the greatest friend.

I am the Self—the ever pure, ever poised, stirless Atman. Pain and pleasure are the two poles of the waves that rise in me. I must not let the wave-consciousness hide and submerge the water-consciousness, the pain and pleasure consciousness the Super-consciousness! Let the *balanced* will live life and for its *own* self as well as the body resting itself securely on the bosom of Self.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

On account of the cold and damp climate of Mayavati where Swami Swarupananda was

stationed, his health suffered a great deal. His heart was never strong, and the constant climbing up and down the steep hills also took a toll on his health. Once, when in nearby Nainital, he was caught in a rainstorm and became drenched. The result was pneumonia, from which he never recovered. He passed away in Nainital on 27 June 1906. In light of the very important and sweet relationship he had with Sister Nivedita, it is perfectly fitting that she was the one to write his obituary in the *Prabuddha Bharata*. One can only imagine how heavy her heart was with grief when she fulfilled that final task. 

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3. This letter is reproduced courtesy of Sri Sarada Math, Dakshineswar, Kolkata, West Bengal.

Swami Swarupananda





## ***Drawn into the Orbit of the New Buddha***

**Swami Atmarupananda**

**A**MONG THE WESTERN WOMEN who played essential roles in the life of Swami Vivekananda, there were three who, following their different paths of life, found themselves drawn into the orbit of Swamiji, and who through him became intimate friends for life. To

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think of them is to think of the great Swamiji; and as long as Swamiji is known to the world, thinking of him will call them to mind as well. Sister Nivedita, Josephine MacLeod, and Sara Bull were apostles, their lives and destinies inextricably intertwined with Swamiji's and with each other, each important in her own individual way to Swamiji's work. They each felt that their meeting with Swamiji was anything but random:

it was their destiny, the meeting that not only gave meaning to their birth but which seemed to be the very purpose of their birth, the goal towards which their early lives had guided them.

And each of them was individual, so finely chiselled a personality. According to Josephine MacLeod, 'It was to set me Free that Swamiji came, that was as much a part of his mission as it was to give Renunciation to Nivedita.'<sup>1</sup> Nivedita, she said, was 'very much the disciple,' but 'I never was a disciple, only a friend' (242–3). 'Only a friend' is one of the great understatements of history: Josephine MacLeod was a Friend of the New Buddha,<sup>2</sup> lifted from the first sight of him into his orbit forever. As for Sister Nivedita, there is no doubt that she was the disciple. Her name, given by Swamiji at her initiation, means 'the Dedicated'. Discipleship became the central fact of her life. But she was far more than just a disciple. She too was swept up into the orbit of this world teacher, and thus her life, like his, took on a historical significance. She is not one more of the many interesting people that met Swamiji. She is not just an early interpreter of India to the West and to India herself. She is not primarily a pioneer in girls' education in India, nor one more figure in the stirrings of Indian nationalism. Yes, she is all of these, but these roles merely ornament her true importance.

In time it will be seen that she has become universalised: through her the cosmic drama of the Great Teacher continues to play out, because she represents something much larger than the strictly historical person, much more than the Irish woman who met Swamiji and dedicated her life to the welfare of India. And that is why it is natural to celebrate Nivedita's one-hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary. Her birth will be celebrated for ages to come.

There are three dominant notes in the melody of her life, without understanding which

we can't possibly understand her. Josephine MacLeod mentions two of them above: Renunciation and discipleship. A third was made crystal clear by Swamiji himself: Dedication to 'the Work',<sup>3</sup> that is, the work of Swami Vivekananda, the mission which Sri Ramakrishna had left him to accomplish, a work which will continue its forward trajectory for at least fifteen hundred years, according to Swamiji.

For those of us who see the Ramakrishna Movement as a budding world religious movement, it is helpful to look at the history of Buddhism and Christianity to understand a little of the present and future of our own movement. At the beginning of these two traditions, we see that the life and thought and practice of the nascent movement centred around the human aspect of the Teacher for one or two centuries after the Teacher's passing. We also see that, though the disciples and their disciples knew that the Teacher was no ordinary saint, most didn't understand the full historical significance of the Teacher's life and message. Much of the early work of forming the movement went into codifying and studying and understanding the basic life and teachings, in an effort to be true to the historical Person.

In Christianity, for instance, you see a tension between St Paul and the direct disciples after the death of Jesus. St Paul never saw Jesus, except in vision, and yet he was the one who understood the historical importance—the world importance—of Jesus. The apostles who had known Jesus, knew him to be divine, but didn't know what that meant to the world at large. They still thought of themselves as a Jewish sect devoted to their great Teacher, not as a world movement. In his epistles, Paul repeatedly insists that they have a universal treasure that must be opened to the larger world outside of Jewish society, with its strict tribal identity and cultural laws.



The same is observed in the beginnings of our own religious movement, the Ramakrishna Movement. The disciples of the Great Teacher thought of him as they had known him: a Human-Divine Being. They remembered his words, his beatific smile, his jokes and laughter, his unfathomable love, the ecstasy they witnessed in him multiple times a day, and the ecstasy that they felt in his presence. They also knew and experienced him to be a living, present reality even after his mahasamadhi, guiding them still, drawing them towards himself, revealing to them more and more of the Infinite and Its infinite Manifestations, *even after* their own liberation.

Their disciples and their disciples' disciples 'grew up' hearing about Sri Ramakrishna with an immediacy that made a profound impression. Even a latecomer like the present author had the great blessing of meeting someone who had known and served Sri Ramakrishna, and whose marriage was arranged by him, and also the great blessing of knowing five people who had seen Swamiji. And thus the historical person remains very much in the fore, even as people recognise that the Teacher has entered a new phase of being: his body is gone but he remains—still living, a tangible Reality, active in the lives of devotees.

The tension seen between St Paul and the other disciples of Christ was seen between Swamiji and the other disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, monastic and lay. Swamiji spent years convincing the other disciples that Sri Ramakrishna and his mission were far larger than anything they had conceived, sometimes unceremoniously smashing their limited conceptions. Thankfully, Sri Ramakrishna had established such a deep bond between Narendra and the other disciples, that the tension was contained by this bond of love.

As generations pass in a new religious

movement, stories of the continuing self-revelation of the Great Teacher accumulate in the collective mind of the movement, stories of people—who have never heard of the Teacher—being awakened by him, people transformed by him before they even know a name for him, stories of devotees seeing him come for them on their deathbed, stories of visions, intercessions, revelations, and examples of realisation mediated through the repetition of his name and dwelling on his form. And thus the ever-present, ever-living, ever-active, omnipresent, and universal aspect of the Great Teacher comes to the fore, not by disconnecting from the historical,<sup>4</sup> but by seeing the historical in a much larger context: by seeing the historical as an expression of the universal.

As this happens, the historical becomes meta-historical, the historical image becomes a mythic Image burned into the consciousness of humanity, the person becomes the Person in the heart of every being, the historical happenings take on cosmic significance, the words once spoken are no longer 'once spoken' but become the voice of the Eternal, revelations to the immediate disciples become revelations to all people for all time, a simple anecdote reveals endless, timeless wisdom.

Let us take an example before we see what this has to do with Sister Nivedita.

When I was a brand new novice—less than three weeks after joining one of our American monasteries—we had the annual Christmas Eve celebration in the temple. There was a little singing, a reading, and then the swami, who was from India, spoke. As we were dispersing after the swami's talk, a devotee passed me and said with dismay, 'Well, the swami ruined Christmas for us once again!' After only three weeks in the monastery, I already knew this devotee as a dependable voice of negativity; and the swami had spoken well and sincerely; yet I immediately



knew what the devotee meant, because I also had been disappointed in the swami's talk. Why?

The swami spoke to us about the Sermon on the Mount, about the nature of an Incarnation of God, and so on: all good, all beautiful, not a negative note. But none of that is Christmas to one brought up in a Christian home and society, as in those days almost everyone was in our Western centres, other than those from a Jewish home. Christmas is about the extraordinary holiness of a timeless moment when a child is born in the stable of a wayside inn, a child who is a window into the Infinite, a window opened by his birth for humanity for all time to come; it's about a holy young woman, his mother Mary, who knows this, and rocks him with the heart of a new mother and yet with the adoration of one who is beholding God; it's about the shepherds out in the field at night seeing a great star coming and standing over the nearby town, and looking in wonder as a host of angels come and address them about the great event that has just happened; it's about three wise men coming from afar and offering gifts to the newborn, recognising him to be Saviour of all.

Christmas for a Christian has nothing to do with the Sermon on the Mount and the later

activities of Jesus. To one *not* brought up in a Christian home or society, on the other hand, the story of the Nativity is just that: a story, very simple, not very interesting, certainly nothing there to talk about: a star, a bunch of angels, and a baby; what is a poor swami supposed to do with that? Yet year after year, every year of every century, century after century for two thousand years, Christians still want to hear and dwell on the same story. Why?

Because the story of a child born in a manger, his parents denied a room at the inn, is no longer just a simple story of strange events that happened long ago. It isn't a fairy tale. Every image in the story has been etched in beautiful, nay, magical script into the minds of the devout, so that it speaks volumes, and the narration evokes the same wonder every Christmas Eve.

That evocative power didn't manifest overnight. It took several centuries. As the focus shifted from the actual life of the Great Teacher to the Teacher Universal—from Jesus of Nazareth to the Logos, the 'Word' and Wisdom of God—and as it shifted from the humble mother Mary to the 'Portal Whence the Light of the World Has Arisen', these images took on cosmic significance.

*Nativity of Jesus Christ*



And so now, when we, the followers of Sri Ramakrishna, read about the first meeting between Narendra and Sri Ramakrishna, we find it beautiful and inspiring. But in time we will see in it so much more. Narendra was not just one more English-educated young Indian who came to the almost unlettered village priest. He was Nara, as Sri Ramakrishna said, the sage of Indian mythology. Nara means 'man', and Narendra was not *a* man, but Man—iconic Man, the incarnation of Man, the Ideal Man behind manifest men; and he was meeting Sri Ramakrishna, the incarnation of Narayana.

Admittedly, that sounds like primitive mythological thinking. It *is* mythological thinking, but not primitive; it is living mythology, based on the considered belief that in time, people around the world will see that Swami Vivekananda represents something universal, as did Sri Ramakrishna, call them what one will—Nara and Narayana or something else. The idea is, they represent universals—the Human and the Divine—and will be recognised as such in time.

And so the meeting between Narendra and Sri Ramakrishna will reveal the meeting of Man with God, the meeting of the Modern World with Ancient Wisdom, the meeting of the seeking Soul within each of us with the Divine Response, the meeting of a world lost in materiality with its Divine Source. The meeting itself will convey rich and endless overtones which blend into the Infinite. Narendra's first question to Sri Ramakrishna—'Have you seen God?'—will be our question. Sri Ramakrishna's response will be his response to us. Even small incidents will reveal great truths.

Sister Nivedita also was lifted into this cosmic lila of the Ramakrishna phenomenon, transformed into one of the actors on stage.

First of all, and easiest to describe, she was a witness to Swamiji, in the West and in India,

over several years. More than a witness, she was a scribe who wrote down much of what she saw and heard, in far greater detail and more systematically than other close witnesses. More than a scribe, she gave a vast context within which to understand Swamiji. Therefore Swami Ramakrishnananda once said that Nivedita had understood Swamiji more than anyone else.

Sister Nivedita, perhaps more than anyone else of her time, more than those of our time, saw the historical significance of Swamiji, as he had been the one to see the historical significance of Sri Ramakrishna. Other disciples knew Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual greatness, but no one else saw, as Swamiji did, the vast historical context of his life. Swamiji once said that even Sri Ramakrishna himself was not conscious of it: 'He did not understand himself ... But he lived that great life—and I read the meaning.'<sup>5</sup> Swamiji *did* know the significance of his own life, saying on the day that he died: 'If there were another Vivekananda, he would have understood what Vivekananda has done! And yet, how many Vivekanandas shall be born in time!!'<sup>6</sup> But he didn't elaborate. Sister Nivedita did.

As Swamiji was uniquely qualified to understand the historical significance of Sri Ramakrishna, so Sister Nivedita was uniquely qualified to understand Swamiji. The Swami's brother-disciples knew his spiritual greatness better than anyone other than Sri Sarada Devi, but even they didn't understand his historical significance as Nivedita did.<sup>7</sup> It will take many centuries for humanity to unravel the meaning of her simple words in the 'Introduction' to the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*.

Thus Nivedita was more than a scribe. As Swamiji had an unprecedented role<sup>8</sup> in the phenomenon of Sri Ramakrishna's incarnation, so Nivedita had an important role in the life and work of Swamiji. As long as Swamiji is known,

all efforts to lock Sri Ramakrishna inside of a temple, all efforts to keep him the property of a sect, all efforts to contain him within a narrow understanding, all efforts to turn him into one more image in the shrine where he can safely be worshipped, will fail. And as long as Sister Nivedita is known, all efforts to see Swamiji as one more saint or yogi to be remembered in calendars and photos, all efforts to see him as someone who watered down the Vedanta tradition to make it palatable to Westerners who were fit for no more, all efforts to present him as an innovator who formed a so-called neo-Vedanta which is untrue to the tradition, all efforts to interpret his mission as parallel to St Paul's through which he travelled around the world trying to make Hindu converts and establish Vedanta Societies, all efforts to show that he was a master at exaggeration, full of hyperbole, who made reckless statements on his own frail authority—all these and other small-minded interpretations, interpretations which one already hears, will fail.

It was discipleship, more than her life as a scribe that defined her very being after her initiation. But here also she was much more than a disciple. We have mentioned how the meeting between Narendra and Sri Ramakrishna will reveal its cosmic significance in time. So with the life of Sister Nivedita. We are not equating her with Swamiji. But those so closely associated with Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swamiji are themselves lifted into the mythic. She was not just a saintly woman who lived and died and left an inspiring story for others to admire: she also had a role to play in the cosmic lila, as Swamiji himself saw after meeting her. As Christ called the fishermen to be fishers of men, so Swamiji called this teacher of English children to be a teacher of the ages.

The meeting of Margaret Noble with Swamiji was the meeting of the West with the East—the two civilisations had already met physically, and

not too happily; even the minds of the two civilisations were gradually becoming acquainted; but here was a meeting between the Soul of the West and the Soul of the East. Later Nivedita reminisced about her initial reaction to Swamiji's words when she first heard him at a private gathering in London; she spoke of 'the coldness and pride with which we all gave our private verdicts on the speaker at the end of our visit. "It was not new", was our accusation, as one by one we spoke with our host and hostess before leaving. All these things had been said before.' Such was not just the hubris of Nivedita and her friends, it was the hubris of cultivated, sophisticated Western society, which sat, as they thought, at the centre of the universe.

When Nivedita gradually submitted to Swamiji as his disciple, it was the submission of the conquering and colonising West to the spiritual wisdom of India. This may not be evident now. In a hundred years it will be.

As she was to dedicate her life to Swamiji's work in India, he insisted that she become Indian Hindu even in her smallest actions, using, for example, lemon juice and powered lentils to wash her hands. And when she returned with him to England to raise money for her work, he told her to forget what she had learned in India and to return to her Western customs. This will in time also reverberate through the world, becoming the model for working in other countries—respecting the integrity of each culture, not trying to turn Africans into Europeans or Afghans into Americans or Japanese into Indians. A new age of cultural respect will flow from Swamiji's attention to the details of her handwashing in India.

In Paris in 1900 Swamiji warned Nivedita about her enthusiasm for the Scottish thinker and sociologist Patrick Geddes. She was deeply hurt, and felt that Swamiji was jealous of her



new enthusiasm—not of course in a romantic sense of the word, but jealous of the professor's influence.<sup>10</sup> Swamiji was cold and distant towards her, and she herself was not forthcoming. She fled from Paris to Brittany in distress. He wrote to her, 'I never had any jealousy about what friends you made. ... Only I do believe the Western people have the peculiarity of trying to force upon others whatever seems good to them, forgetting that what is good for you may not be good for others.'<sup>11</sup> This also was not written just to Nivedita, words read once in the course of a private letter and addressed to her troubled mind of the time. It illustrates a universal principle and was spoken to the world.

Those who see in Nivedita's subsequent year and a half in England a distancing of herself from Swamiji, a distancing of herself from the work and methods he had assigned her, and nothing more, have not understood her, nor understood what she represents. Why had Swamiji chosen her, from all the people he had met and loved and valued? It was the depth of her inner strength. As Sri Ramakrishna had delighted in the resistance of Narendra to his teachings, seeing in that very resistance Narendra's strength of mind, so Swamiji had chosen Nivedita for her inner substance. He worked hard, and she suffered terribly, as he took her personality apart and began to rebuild it. That process had taken Sri Ramakrishna five years with Narendra, and even after the Master passed away, Swamiji wandered through the

Himalayas trying to throw off the burden that Sri Ramakrishna had given him: his mission.

And so it took time with Nivedita. We shouldn't wonder at it, nor should we doubt that Swamiji had known what he was doing when he chose her. The deeper the character, the more profound the reorientation. Those alone who have gone through a similar experience of total cultural reorientation can see and identify with what went on within her.

Though Swamiji was in a class of his own, even among his great brother-disciples, Nivedita was similar

in temperament: strong, independent by nature, intellectually alive and brilliant, a person of contrasting moods, moving from the crest of a giant wave of ecstasy to the trough of despair and back again in quick succession.

What she needed was something real at the root of her being, something ultimately True and Significant

into which she could pour herself as an oblation, plus she needed the purification necessary for that ultimate self-oblation. Swamiji gave her both, and out of that came Nivedita the power. The time has not yet come when we can fully understand her. We need more distance in time, more depth of insight. We need the ability to see her from within, not just to observe her from without to see what she did and didn't do, judged by our own standards.

And if she is to be understood, it will have to be an understanding that sees her whole, not a comfortably truncated person that is artificially






harmonious. It will have to include the contradictions she faced within herself and without—creative contradictions, not the petty contradictions that sap the life-force of ordinary people—for in the midst of the dramatic intensity of her life lived a great woman, a witness to the modern Buddha, his scribe and interpreter, a disciple dedicated at his feet, the very image of renunciation, a whole-souled oblation of self into the fire of his mission, a *Vajradharini* or Holder of the Thunderbolt whose every act manifested power, a saint who had glimpsed the other shore, and a Light to future ages: Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda.

And Nivedita's life has to be seen as a process. Swamiji blessed her at her initiation in 1898 thus: 'Go thou, and follow Him who was born and gave His life for others *five hundred times* before He attained the vision of the Buddha.'<sup>12</sup> And one sees in her life a constant struggle for the ideal, a constant, insistent effort to manifest it; she was always trying to deepen her renunciation and dedication, never feeling that she was yet worthy of Swamiji's trust. This doesn't mean that she was a failure compared to those whose path was so much smoother, like the extraordinary Josephine MacLeod. It means that she was different, a difference Swamiji made absolutely clear: *she* was meant for the work, and so her training was different and detailed and uncompromising.

But Swamiji's work has only started, and Nivedita's life was one of preparation. It is this writer's conviction that we haven't seen the end of Nivedita: she will return and burst upon society, a thunderbolt blazing with the flames of renunciation and a power that electrifies society. We without insight may not see the connection with the one known as Nivedita, but that connection alone will explain her extraordinary power. For in her years of association with Swamiji, she gave her life the equivalent of five

hundred times, becoming a pure oblation of fire into Fire, self into Self, love into Love. 

## Notes and References

1. His Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 244.
2. Josephine MacLeod sometimes referred to Swamiji as 'the modern Buddha' or 'the new Buddha', and said that her life's purpose was to discover him.
3. See Linda Prugh, *Josephine MacLeod* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1999), 110, 121.
4. In the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, the connection with the historical was all but lost, allowing the idea of Buddhahood to become so imaginative as to be unreachable, whereas in the Theravada the historical letter was kept so strictly that the spirit was lost: neither is desirable.
5. Sister Nivedita, *The Master As I Saw Him* (Calcutta: Udbodhan Office, 1972), 197.
6. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2001), 2.652.
7. We know from various statements that the Holy Mother *did* fully understand it, though, like Sri Ramakrishna, she could not have described it in terms of a historical analysis.
8. 'Unprecedented role' because never has a great world teacher like Sri Ramakrishna had such a great soul as helpmate. St Paul was a great mystic, utterly dedicated; the Buddha had various disciples that attained enlightenment and helped in the establishment of Buddhism; Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu had Nityananda, a great saint; but all of these were saints, not themselves world-movers, not themselves Buddhas. Swamiji was not less than a Buddha himself who, as will be evident in another hundred years, redirected the course of world history.
9. *The Master As I Saw Him*, 9.
10. For those who have been quick to criticise Nivedita for this conflict of interests, we can do no better than remind them of the episode between Swamiji and Pavahari Baba.
11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 6.435.
12. *Josephine MacLeod*, 115. Emphasis in original.

# Saga of Epic Proportions

Swami Sandarshanananda



*An Old Photograph of the Vivekananda Rock at Kanyakumari where Swamiji Meditated*

SCIENCE HAD A CONSPICUOUS beginning in India. Its legacy bears testimony to India's progressive civilisation from its earliest period. Given that intuition plays a pivotal role in the making of science, India had a rich resource of intuitive scientists down the ages who shaped science in India effectively. They famously invented that the 'intuitive experience which is called self-realization is not infra-rational but supra-rational.' Swami Vivekananda tells us: 'You know how many sciences had their origin in India. Mathematics began there. ... and you all know that algebra also originated in India, and that gravitation was known to the Indian thousands of years before Newton was born.'<sup>1</sup>

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'Science is best defined as a careful, disciplined, logical search for knowledge about any and all aspects of the universe, obtained by examination of the best available evidence and always subject to correction and improvement upon discovery of better evidence.'<sup>2</sup> By the token of this latest definition the ancient Indian mind is recognisably a mind steep in the mood of investigation, observation, and conclusion which constitute the basis of scientific search and research per se.

Even then, as Swamiji had sent a note of caution saying, 'superstition' is a common factor in the matter of religion as well as science. His exact words in this connection are:

I must ask you to bear in mind that, as there is religious superstition, so also there is a superstition in the matter of science. There are priests

who take up religious work as their specialty; so also there are priests of the physical laws, scientists. As soon as a great scientist's name, like Darwin or Huxley, is cited, we follow blindly. It is the fashion of the day. Ninety-nine per cent of what we call scientific knowledge is mere theories. And many of them are no better than the old superstitions of ghosts with many heads and hands, but with this difference that the latter differentiated man a little from stocks and stones. True science asks us to be cautious. Just as we should be careful with the priests, so we should be with the scientists. Begin with disbelief. Analyse, test, prove everything, and then take it. Some of the most current beliefs of modern science have not been proved. Even in such a science as mathematics, the vast majority of its theories are only working hypotheses. With the advent of greater knowledge they will be thrown away.<sup>3</sup>

Incidentally, this observation lets one see how minutely Swamiji followed the prospects and contradictions in the scientific world along with the realm of religion, going above prejudices with an open mind.

There is no doubt that the seers of India were quite careful as to what they were seeking. They were adequately disciplined to be able to attain the required concentration level for penetrative analysis, and sharply argumentative for logical establishment of truth in the end. They were well advanced by dint of a core question which benignly disturbed them incessantly. 'What should a person must ultimately know so that everything becomes known to him?' Delusion slaying wisdom was, in fact, their target, and they were aware that nothing short of a spiritual experience of the highest order could annihilate the ignorance born of delusion.

As a result, the best product of their assiduous endeavours is a composite system of thoughts and ideas unanimously treasured. It, evidently, relentlessly fascinates scholars and thinkers from

across the globe. The discovery of transcendental laws that govern and sustain the universe, and that perfectly design microcosm and macrocosm in the same fashion innocuously to its pristine purpose of flawless continuity as well, is undeniably an unsurpassable achievement of which India could be justifiably proud.

Even more, India's invention of a unified uncaused cause of all caused palpable phenomena by virtue of direct and independent intuitive perception is indeed an example of unassailable concept to scientists of all times having an inkling of unified field theory. It clearly speaks volumes of what science could ultimately accomplish with the help of singleminded intuitive initiative, sans laboratory and instruments. This certainly endowed India with an exceptional capability of harnessing the vision of an unobtrusive order, resorting to absolute ramifications latently inbuilt in the sense tangible cognitive world.

Astoundingly, intuitive scientists of India, thus, contemplatively acquired the highest knowledge of irreducible primal matter and energy as the fundamental building blocks responsible for the creation of the universe containing sentient and insentient beings. In the process, they had provided intrigued observers with precise interpretations for cyclic evolution and involution of the universe taking place steadily in a spontaneous manner eternally. Aspects of cause and effect along with the complex mechanism of work and its retribution embedded in them, determining the psychosomatic behavioural pattern of Homo sapiens were also uniquely within their ken.

All that mentioned above go to making science fabulously wealthy for a comprehensive exploration and accumulation of knowledge that could prove utterly propitious for accounting the mind boggling activities of the universe, if seriously considered with respect by modern science and its practitioners. In short, spiritually



inspired Indian intuitive scientist pierced the apparently impregnable mystery of the universe, applying the powers of thought through concentration of the mind to the optimum. In other words, they realised the reality which seems impossible by the conventional methods of material science came into vogue much later. The non-conventional science tethered to intuition is equally important. It probes deeper into the reality resorting to a psychic process fueled by the powers of the mind. Meticulously trained individual mind being a part of the universal mind is able to intuitively discover the finest laws framed by the universal mind. The 'greatest power is lodged in the fine, not in the coarse' (2.16). Intuitive science can get hold of the finer forces which are the cause of the expression of the gross forces which the conventional science analyses. 'It is not a freak of nature that a man is born with such powers. They can be systematically studied, practised, and acquired' (2.12). There is nothing supernatural in them. 'They are under laws just the same as any other physical phenomenon' (ibid.). There were numerous in India who cultivated their science, and for the whole nation it had 'become a part of daily worship' (ibid.). But how does an intuitive scientist articulate his experience when he realises God? Its answer is available in Swamiji. In his paper on Hinduism—which he presented at the Parliament of Religions in the US in 1893, later than the experience alluded to below that he had in the forest of Almora—Swamiji discussed science and God in the same breath. He said:

Science is said to have proved that the sum total of cosmic energy is always the same. Then, if there was a time when nothing existed, where was all this manifested energy? Some say it was in a potential form in God. In that case God is sometimes potential and sometimes kinetic, which would make Him mutable. Everything

mutable is a compound, and everything compound must undergo that change which is called destruction. So God would die, which is absurd. Therefore there never was a time when there was no creation (1.7).

At the end of the nineteenth century in 1896, even the chauvinistic paper *The Spectator* in England known for its overt hypercritical attitude towards India once eulogised India's indigenous method of research with due sincerity. It said: 'He [Dr Jagidish Chandra Bose] has just the burning imagination which could extort a truth out of a mass of apparently disconnected facts; a habit of meditation without allowing the mind to dissipate itself, such as has belonged to the greatest mathematicians and engineers; and a power of persistence—it is something a little different from patience—such as has hardly belonged to any European.'<sup>4</sup> Likewise, some front-line scientists of the last century had vouched the veracity of this. They admiringly admitted the early Indian contribution; and they had no problem to reconcile science with spirituality in its light conclusively. *The Spectator* made the above statement while praising an Indian scientist—Dr Jagadish Chandra Bose—whose discovery in Physics under a primitive arrangement of experiments was then acclaimed internationally by various world class scientists and learned bodies of science as unparalleled. Continuing, it had said in that context:

Nothing would seem to him [Bose] laborious in his inquiry, nothing insignificant, nothing painful, any more than it would seem to the true Sunyasee [sic] in the pursuit of *his* inquiry into the ultimate relation of his own spirit to that of the divine. Just think what kind of addition to the means of investigation would be made by the arrival within that sphere of inquiry of a thousand men with the Sunyasee mind, the mind which utterly controls the body and can meditate or inquire endlessly while life remains,



never for a moment losing sight of the object, never for a moment letting it be obscured by any terrestrial temptation (ibid.).

However, the fact that science had otherwise shaped India physically too through vicissitudes is evident from Indus valley archaeological finds to the extant socio-cultural characters of Dravidian and Aryan peoples having the same life-current flowing in them with no differences in their essential thought processes. If one could only delve the depths, one could surely see each Indian hearth and home is an unconscious demonstration of scientific wisdom passed on from generation to generation habitually as integral part of subsistence from when nobody knows.

In fine, India has all along believed that every spiritual soul harbours an amazing inquisitive mind. His curiosity is inexorably stretched far beyond the periphery of gross sense imagination, and not easily quenchable. He seeks the ultimate truth perpetually, harbouring a sophisticated temperament. In this he asserts like an avid scientist unequivocally, and, thereby, proves his worth. Thus, a perfect questioner, he satisfies his spiritual teacher. In return, considering his real urgency and competence, the teacher, a realised soul forthwith endows him with the knowledge of the Truth. It happened with a resolute Nachiketa of yore.

It happened in the recent times with an unbending Swami Vivekananda as well. Nothing much is, however, known about the former, save his incisive instinctive metaphysical queries depicted in an ancient *Katha Upanishad*, implicitly indicating a scientific attitude. Nachiketa excelled definitely for having such a mind and was able to extract the knowledge of the Self from his master Yama with an unbreakable confidence and commitment to truth. But, the latter was absolutely explicit about his fascination for science as it is today. The language he sometimes used while giving his speeches in the West was of modern science.

Notwithstanding his unwavering affiliation with and intricate involvement in spirituality, Swamiji is nevertheless expressly a sincere believer of material science for its utilitarian temporal values. He indubitably inherits this spirit from his master Sri Ramakrishna. His master would say: 'You cannot with reason deny that there is a Power working behind the universe. One may attribute any name to it, but it remains there all the same. Why not take it in that spirit and try to know more intimately what you believe in.'<sup>5</sup> Teaching of this kind served in him to diminish the dichotomy between science and spirituality and resonate with his Masters unprecedented

Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937) in  
Royal Institution, London



ideas. One of his brother disciples described his status vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna's personality thus: 'The Master and Swamiji are really one spirit as it were, manifested in twin personalities. What we find in the Master in the form of a seed, becomes fully developed in Swamiji' (586). No wonder, being a patriot prophet, he, then, champions the cause of cultivation of science in his mother country while it is being sedulously undermined by an alien ruler.

The fact that Swamiji was absorbed in science is evident in his official biography. For instance, in it there is an allusion to an incident where he discovers a significant scientific truth during his peripatetic phase as an itinerant monk.<sup>6</sup> After a deep meditation under a *pipul* tree at *Kakrighat* near Almora he told his brother disciple companion: 'I have just passed through one of the greatest moments of my life. ... I have found the oneness of the macrocosm with the microcosm. In this microcosm of the body everything that is there [in the macrocosm], exists. I have seen the whole universe within an atom' (250).

Needless to say, although he discovered it like an intuitive scientist, his name, admittedly, couldn't be put among other scientists regularly for obvious reasons. Yet, he spoke on science in such words which could be comparable with the words of any modern scientist. For example, he says:

Nothing can be evolved which is not already there. Here, again, modern science comes to our help. You know by mathematical reasoning that the sum total of the energy that is displayed in the universe is the same throughout. You cannot take away one atom of matter or one foot-pound of force. You cannot add to the universe one atom of matter or one foot-pound of force. As such, evolution does not come out of zero; then, where does it come from? From previous involution. The child is the man involved, and the man is the child evolved. The seed is the tree involved, and the tree is the seed evolved. All the possibilities of life are in the germ. The problem becomes a little clearer. Add to it the first idea of continuation of life. From the lowest protoplasm to the most perfect human being there is really but one life. Just as in one life we have so many various phases of expression,

*Peepal Tree at Kakrighat near Almora where Swamiji had the Experience of the Oneness of the Macrocosm with the Microcosm*





the protoplasm developing into the baby, the child, the young man, the old man, so, from that protoplasm up to the most perfect man we get one continuous life, one chain. This is evolution, but we have seen that each evolution presupposes an involution. The whole of this life which slowly manifests itself evolves itself from the protoplasm to the perfected human being—the Incarnation of God on earth—the whole of this series is but one life, and the whole of this manifestation must have been involved in that very protoplasm.<sup>7</sup>

The twentieth century science was deeply engaged in the understanding of matter, energy, force, life, and so on. Setting a precedent, Swamiji adds to them the spiritual aspect in human existence for its interpretation from the same perspective. He could be, therefore, described as a forerunner thinker of a new chapter of scientific research which seeks to unlock the enigma of Real Man latent in the apparent man.

Swamiji's final word to the modern scientists could be, perhaps, traceable in the following passage from his speech 'Evolution of the Conception of God' given in 1896 in London:

What you call matter, or spirit, or mind, or anything else you may like to call them, the fact remains the same: we cannot say that they are, we cannot say that they are not. We cannot say they are one, we cannot say they are many. This eternal play of light and darkness—indiscriminate, indistinguishable, inseparable—is always there. A fact, yet at the same time not a fact; awake and at the same time asleep. This is a statement of facts, and this is what is called Maya. We are born in this Maya, we live in it, we think in it, we dream in it. We are philosophers in it, we are spiritual men in it, nay, we are devils in this Maya, and we are gods in this Maya. Stretch your ideas as far as you can, make them higher and higher, call them infinite or by any other name you please, even these ideas are within

this Maya. It cannot be otherwise, and the whole of human knowledge is a generalisation of this Maya trying to know it as it appears to be. This is the work of Nama-rupa—name and form. Everything that has form, everything that calls up an idea in your mind, is within Maya; for everything that is bound by the laws of time, space and causation is within Maya (2.112).

### **Vivekananda and Bose**

In September 1900 Swamiji spoke at the Congress of the History of Religions in Paris at the Sorbonne held in connection with the Paris Exposition. In all probability he spoke there in French, for there are references in his letters he was preparing himself for that purpose and said he had 'somewhat mastered the French language'. It is most likely also for a news item in the *Indian Mirror* of 3 July 1900<sup>8</sup> as well as in the *Indian Spectator* of 8 July (415) that said: 'Swami Vivekananda has been invited to present Hinduism and Vedanta in the Paris Exhibition and the Swami will deliver an address in French.'<sup>9</sup>

Of all the events there, his meeting with scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose was of overriding importance. He was proud and overjoyed to find Dr Bose participating along with the eminent scientists of the West. He was full of his praise before the galaxy of celebrated personalities rubbing shoulders with him.

Bose was by then well known for his spectacular discovery on the sensitivity of plant. Swamiji was excited like a child over this signal achievement of his young countryman. A student of famous English scientist mentioned her professor was 'experimenting on the growth of a stunted lily'. Swamiji humorously replied in the presence of many distinguished people, 'Oh, that's nothing! Bose will make the very pot in which the lily grows respond!' (2.538). Such was his simple child-like expression of pride for Bose, signifying his deep respect for his motherland

languishing in the dark because of a policy not to let her come up in any way.

Swamiji made Bose's appearance at the Paris Congress a national cause. He was enormously impressed by his courageous scientific activity and was thereby so much enamoured of him. Writing to Miss Josephine Macleod on 13 September 1911, Sister Nivedita had said:

All you say about the Bairn [J C Bose] in this last letter, sounds such a true and warm note! You say you are proud, because in Science inarticulate India has become articulate! I think that was just how Swamiji felt. I think *He* loved him [Bose] more than we have any idea of. And for my part I always feel that the greatness of India cannot be disputed, if we understand the value of his work—in as much as with all that is against her in the present age, the Motherland has given to the world *such* gifts of Religion and Science. All other great men here have been great by their service to India herself. They work within a more limited circle. But in Religion Vivekananda and in Science Bose, have made offerings to the *World*.<sup>10</sup>

Before 1900 Swamiji and Bose were knowledgeable about each other. But, from 1899 onwards they were actively communicating among them through Nivedita, primarily because of Nivedita's interest—she thought an intimate companionship was really good for India. Both were present and popular in England at the same time during 1896. Their achievements in their individual areas of work were duly recognised by English intellectuals, and they were being focused in the leading newspapers. Actually, the year 1896 was much exhilarating to Indians as for the stirring performances of Swamiji and Bose in Religion and Science, so also for Atul Chandra Chatterji's and Ranjitsinghi's in India Civil Service and cricket respectively. Regarding the latter two Sir William Hunter wrote in *The Times* on 9 October 1896:

The head of the English cricket for the year, and the head of the India Civil Service competition for the year are both Hindus. Mr. Chatterji's achievement is not less remarkable in the arena of intellectual athletics than is Prince Ranjitsinghi's in the world sport. Probably no career open to Englishmen exerts a more powerful traction on the clever youth of our public schools and Universities than the Indian Civil Service, and the competition for its appointments has been elaborated into the most searching test that the wit of the examiners can devise. The distinguished academic careers of many of the 61 gentlemen who follow Mr. Chatterji in the list show the class of rivals among whom he has won the first place.<sup>11</sup>

About J C Bose Sir William Hunter had, on the other hand, said:

Among the most interesting features at the British Association this year was the paper on Electrical Waves by Professor J. C. Bose. This gentleman, an M.A. of Cambridge, Doctor of Science of London, and a graduate of the Calcutta University, had already won the attention of the scientific world by his strikingly original researches on the polarization of the electric ray. His later papers on the Indices of Electric Refraction and the Wave-length of Electric Radiation were published with high tributes, by the Royal Society. Lord Kelvin declared himself 'literally filled with wonder and admiration for so much success in these difficult and novel experimental problems'. The originality of the achievement is enhanced by the fact that Dr. Bose had to do the work in addition to his incessant duties as professor of Physical Science in Calcutta and with apparatus and appliances which in this country would be deemed altogether inadequate. He had to construct for himself his instruments as he went along. The paper which was read before the British Association the other day 'On a Complete Apparatus for the Study of the Properties of Electric Waves' forms the outcome of this twofold line of labour—construction and research. ... The position which Professor Bose has attained among



British men of science, while himself still in the first energies of manhood, is as significant as the success of Prince Ranjitsinghji and Mr. Chatterji in their widely diverse fields of effort (ibid.).

Interestingly, a reception arranged by the organisation *Indian Majlish* in London though specially honoured Ranjitsinghji and Atul Chandra Chatterji, it didn't invite Dr Bose and Swamiji for the same in spite of their presence there then. More surprisingly, Swamiji very much participated in its meeting and delivered a speech.

That Bose, as well, felt himself intimate to Swamiji since, is discernible from other happenings. He heard a lot about him from Sister Nivedita since 1899 when sister came in his close contact first. From the very beginning there was a perfect rapport between the two, both having the same wavelength of thought. Each saw in the other a genius and there was not an iota of misunderstanding among them ever. Learning from her, Bose came to realise how great Swamiji was. He was senior to Swamiji by five years. Bose was born in 1858, and Swamiji in 1863. Bose, an initiated Brahmo, obviously didn't see eye to eye with Swamiji in the matter of religious faith. This, of course, did not hamper his respect for him, although this had initially posed a sort of stumbling block before him, not to exist long.

Swamiji was a worshipper of Kali and guru which was despicable to every Brahmo in those days. That Bose was at first antagonistic is apparent in Nivedita's letter of 15 March 1899 to Mrs Bull.

It grieves me much to find the attitude of men like Dr. Bose—whom I love as I love Mr. Aperson, short time as I have known him—to the Swami, since I lectured on Kali. *Now* all that you said about the Comparative Study of Religion is beginning to have its real value for me. I understand by the baffled feeling he gives me when we talk on the question how impossible any other line of approach will be for him, to see these things as we see them. And his position,



*Mrs Sara Ole Bull (1850–1911)*

great thinker and scholar as he is in other lines, seems, compared to Swami's on this branch, a position of ignorance and superstition compared to science and reason.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Nivedita had to struggle a lot to get Bose on the right track. Bose's Brahmo bigotry was ingrained, which made him faith-wise myopic necessarily. He couldn't accept Sri Ramakrishna at all for his role as guru and preaching of Kali for its idolatry and practice of a sect. He thought Sri Ramakrishna was even misogynic. His scurrilous remarks sounded sometimes intolerable to her. In a letter to Miss Josephine Macleod dated 5 April 1899 she narrated how she had to grapple with his arrogance in this connection.

The event of the week has been my talk with Dr. Bose on Friday night. I love that man. He told me with some bitterness that he meant to school himself into calling me 'S. N.' [Sister Nivedita] instead of Miss N. [Noble]. Then he would be able to think of me less as a human being. At present my dreadful narrowness hurt him unbearably. (It haunts me like a bad dream that someone whom I loved and trusted thought me 'narrow' once before. Could it have been you or S. Sara?) I coaxed him to tell me our differences. Then it came out. The deification of Swami's Guru. 'A man cast in a narrow mould—a man who held woman to be something half fiend—so that when He saw one He had a fit'!!!!!! Did you ever? Between a gasp and a smile I said I could not accept the narrative. I confessed that I too worshiped blindly—but pointed out that we none of us, least of all Swamis wanted him to worship too. That was personal. 'An Avatar-doctrine could not supply India's present need of religion, all-embracing, sect-uniting etc.' (Curious!—to me it seems the only possible way to meet that need. An Avatar who declares that sects are at an end!) The man who does not believe in Incarnation will not call him an Avatar like Swarupananda. 'This could not prove the new religion.'

I said no one wanted it. No one was planning or bothering to do more than this one bit of educational work that the Order had before it in all directions now. Questions of worship and the religion of the future could do (I almost said 'what they darned pleased') what they liked. Then he spoke of the great thrill with which he heard the Swami say that his mission was to bring manliness to his people, and with which still in England he read his Calcutta lectures and saw him contemptuously tear his great popularity to tatters for the real good of truth and man. But when found him proceeding to worship his Guru and other things (my Kali etc.) he had dropped with a groan. The man who had been a hero had become the leader of a new sect.

I tell you all this by way of record. Someday people will say Swami neither did nor taught

anything new. So this emotional divergence is quite precious to me.

I could have argued—but I thought the time for that was not yet. Instead, I wrote a letter full of love and worship of them both—insisting that I at least should enjoy *their* patriotism if they wouldn't have ours. Both were so obviously necessary etc. A sweet note came back—and that is all so far (1.102–3).

By the grace of God and by dint of Swamiji's tutelage Nivedita never suffered from any confusion regarding Indian culture and religion. She wrote to her sister on 9 March: 'The fact is—in India you do in the name of religion just what you choose, only all possible desires and deeds are scientifically classified, so that you can find out where you are spiritually by your own desires' (1.77). This is the concept she was perhaps able to drive by and by into Bose at last and had won her battle. She was quite sure that Bose, a different kind of Brahmo and of exceptional quality of resilience, could overcome all hurdles. Intelligibly, that is the only reason why she had boundless affection for him and condoned all his initial limitations as well as shortcomings. She was overwhelmed by his simplicity and ingenuity so much that she had addressed him as 'bairn'—a Scot term meaning child. She was happy that Girish Chandra Ghosh also believed triumph would be her—Bose would eventually change for good, as she had constantly wished. She therefore mentioned to Miss Macleod in the same letter, 'Dear old Mr. Ghose says that Dr. Bose will soon be one of us—since he is not indifferent' (1.103).

Trusting his transformation imminent and his ideas surrounding Swamiji and his guru Sri Ramakrishna contrived and confounded in consequence of Brahmo indoctrination, Nivedita did never lose heart and was never at her wits' end while handling Bose. She exercised fortitude and was always hopeful she could make him her own,

making him anyway respectful to Ramakrishna-Vivekananda. Needless to say, her percipient patience and unsullied conviction paid her propitious returns in due course, bearing the best of results. Her next letter to Miss Macleod on 8 April 1899, accordingly, carries the tone of that feeling and sentiment prominently, notwithstanding his recalcitrant demeanour. It goes on thus:

Now I want to tell you much and invoke your angelic aid. I spent yesterday with the Boses—the whole day—it was like going to you at Bally, almost at Bellur. For at last the friend I loved and craved is mine. And how great! How simple!—and thro' what suffering! Oh how I despise my own impatience of suffering when I see the bitterness of life's cup to the truly great. It is so poor to be just happy—though as Nim [her sister] says with such wonderful truth—it is surely a 'most Godlike thing to be bright'. It would be a breach of confidence to let even the listening atmosphere hear again that story that he told me last night on the Verandah—but when I tell you that he ended by a short reference to the difference that race feeling had brought about in his colleagues' treatment of him since his return from the outburst of glory in Europe—and by saying that this robbed him of all heart to do his work—'for I cannot tell you what a need I have of being loved.' You will divinely understand, and though you will never tell even as much as that you will know how to write to those people, sending them Miss Wilkins' little books ('A Humble Romance' and 'A Far Away Melody') or some other trifle, of your love and pride in their friendship. And you may be proud. An Englishman ('strictly confidential') who after a tussle with himself (I'm proud of that Englishman, but ashamed that the struggle should have been necessary) said that the Viceroy would be untying his shoe-strings one day, if he went on as he had begun!

I could not help it—I have just crammed a sheet of notepaper with all the love and courage I could put on to it, and addressed it to Presidency College, that he may get it as he steps into his

laboratory tomorrow morning. And I said that my friendship came as the expression of your and S. Sara's [Mrs Bull's] and King's [Swamiji's] love and pride. And *you* were worth having! And I am sure you, without my seeming to have told you, could write a ringing word of cheer and hope, Dear strong Yum [Miss Macleod]. As for S. Sara herself there's no need for any excuse in her case—for he is just dying to write and be written by her—and he told me yesterday that I ought never to write to her without mentioning his love and admiration for it was 'always going on' (1.106–7).

(To be continued)

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## ***Nivedita: A Blend of Strength and Softness***

**Swami Kritarthananda**

### ***Juxtaposing Opposite Natures***

**O**NCE IN AN INTERVIEW with a representative of the then American daily *Detroit Free Press* the questioner asked Swami Vivekananda: ‘But will it not be an impossibility to find in the great combative Western countries, where such tremendous energy is needed to develop the pressing practical necessities of the nineteenth century, this spirit which prevails in placid India?’ To this he replied with a smile, ‘May not one combine the energy of the lion with the gentleness of the lamb?’<sup>1</sup> In later years, when Swami Vivekananda returned to India, once again he expressed the very same idea in his plans for the universal temple of Sri Ramakrishna. In his conversation with Prof. Ranadaprasad Das Gupta, founder of Calcutta Jubilee Art Academy, he said, ‘On the two sides of the door will be represented the figure of a lion and a lamb licking each other’s body in

love—expressing the idea that great power and gentleness have become united in love’ (7.205).

Did this idea of his ever become materialised in human form? ‘Yes,’ comes the emphatic answer, ‘in many of his torch-bearers.’ But the name that leads all the rest is Nivedita, also known as Miss Margaret Elizabeth Noble! In fact the nineteenth-century India witnessed a number of her western benefactors who did a lot in spreading education among boys and girls of India. David Hare, Derozio, Lord Bethune, and many such persons did indeed contribute a lot in educating the Indian people. But they all did it in a spirit of charity or compassion for the helpless. Besides, their aim was to inculcate English education into the Indians. On the other hand Sister Nivedita first moulded her whole personality into the Indian pattern, that is, she became a wholehearted Indian woman, and then looked through the eyes of her pupils in their own way. Instead of forcing into them a foreign culture, she insisted on their learning in the ancient Indian way, and that too in their mother tongue. She first learnt in detail about the rich stock of Indian culture from her Master Swami Vivekananda, and then realised how foolish it is to ignore that great culture which ran through the nerve currents of every Indian. It was,

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no doubt, a herculean task; yet she did it braving all the pains to learn not only Bengali language but even the household customs of conservative Bengal. To put it in the other way, she identified herself with the Indian mind. Even when the great poet Rabindranath Tagore approached her to teach his youngest daughter English, she refused point-blank. That is why she stands before the Indian mind head and shoulders above all other western reformers and 'friends' of India.

### **Childhood Environment and Upbringing**

How did she blend in her the strength of a lion and the mildness of a lamb? To know the secret of that it is worthwhile in such a context to look into the whole life-stream of such a rare soul, starting from her very birth, as also her upbringing that made her develop such a unique attitude towards life. By the will of Providence she was born in an Irish protestant family at a period when the age-old conflict between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants was reconciled at least temporarily by her noble-hearted grandfather John Noble. His able son Samuel was also a representation of idealism and independence, which he passed on to his eldest daughter Margaret, later Nivedita as a legacy. One evening Samuel declared to his mother that all commercial transaction was nothing but 'legalized theft.'<sup>2</sup> Remember Sri Ramakrishna's attitude towards businessmen, lawyers, doctors, and so on. So, leaving his infant daughter to the care of his mother, he went with his wife to England to join as a theological student in the Wesleyan church in Manchester. Margaret grew up under the personal care of her grandmother with a happy childhood which, however, did not last long. Soon she was taken to her father's at Oldham and subsequently to Great Torrington, and found herself a guardian of her two siblings—sister May, who was three years old, and the newborn brother Richmond.

Her father Samuel had set an example of perfect self-abnegation with his strict habit of 'living religion'. This left a marked impression in Margaret's mind and she realised that integrity alone could save her from the punishment of the Almighty.

Samuel died at just thirty-four years. As a last message to his wife he whispered Margaret's name and said: 'When God calls her, let her go. ... She will do great things' (14). This was a clear sign that his daughter was divinely ordained to dedicate her life to God. And Swami Vivekananda was intuitively aware of this secret; so in later years he initiated her into the most fitting Sanskrit name 'Nivedita', meaning, the dedicated.

When Margaret and her sister May were sent to Halifax College, they met their headmistress, Miss Larrett, who loosed upon her students a wave of genuine religious fervour bolstered by self-sacrifice and repentance. The exercise of personal sacrifice became part of the general training. Thus Margaret's training at home and school remained centred around self-sacrifice and purity of soul.

Miss Larrett was succeeded by Miss Collins who taught Margaret the beauty of art and music. Under her careful guidance Margaret gradually came to realise that 'religion was a vaster science even than chemistry and physics, and that one had to find within oneself, by personal experience, the answer to all spiritual problems' (18). In spite of the strict regime of life—imposed by Miss Larrett earlier—she underwent in her school, Margaret's mind happened to escape now and then into the realm of dreams and fantasies commonly found in artists, musicians, and spiritual persons. She would lead her dormitory companions into that world through suitable lively stories. Again, the philosophical wisdom of Miss Collins aroused in Margaret the age-old conundrum that once assailed many spiritual aspirant like Nachiketas in the *Katha Upanishad*: 'Can death really destroy life? What happens to

the life element during death if nothing is ever destroyed in the successive transformations?’<sup>3</sup> Miss Collins, sensing clearly the innate potentials of Margaret, allowed her freedom to think and do as she pleased. Margaret passed her examinations brilliantly and left school with the pronounced determination to earn her own living.

After passing from the school at eighteen years Margaret embraced her new career as a teacher in the summer of 1885. There she gradually developed her own way of examining her students’ reaction instead of imposing a prepared course of study. The headmistress of the school was astonished at her new science of teaching. Later she wanted to conduct another new experiment to test her powers of renunciation and sacrifice. She chose to teach in an orphanage in Rugby, where twenty girls—charity pupils—were being brought up to be domestic servants. There she shared her pupils’ manual labour and taught them to feel the joy of fulfilment through that labour while living after the ideal of their faith. Yet it seemed she was never too satisfied in testing her own spirit of self-abnegation in newer fields. So she joined another secondary school at Wrexham, a large mining centre, in order to gain experience in social welfare work. Through her association with the students and their families she went to the heart of the working man’s existence and learnt much about the wretched conditions of the miners there. At the heart of the mining centre there stood a church where Margaret enrolled as a district worker, undertaking welfare research, visiting slum households, searching out pregnant women in factories, looking for waifs and strays. She started giving assistance without discrimination to the poor, to people who never went to church, even to members of other congregations. As an inevitable consequence she was met with serious obstacles which seemed to paralyse her efforts and stir up strife. So she gave up

that work. But dauntless as she was, she gave vent to her pent up feelings and sent an open letter to the *North Wales Guardian*, exposing the Church’s internal policy. The tremendous upshot of this effort made her discover that the power of her pen, properly wielded, could exert a greater influence than her social activities. So she set herself to the task of applying this trait to the service of the oppressed at the mining centre. Such a daring spirit to ford through new ventures, however adverse, and to stick to them through thick and thin can only be attributed to a lion.

After this experience Margaret’s interest gradually grew up in a new method of education, and she felt that the best way to impart education is to concentrate on the pupil individually. To do this she first took her own childhood memories and reactions by way of a self-analysis and rediscovered her own personality through her obscure yearnings for affection, her concealed weaknesses, her upsurge of enthusiasm. This study revealed to her the real meaning of the inner freedom she always sought.<sup>4</sup>

Time was ripe for Margaret to put into practice her own generalised conclusions about a child’s personality. She was offered a teacher’s job in a newly founded school in Wimbledon, and she did not hesitate a moment to accept it wholeheartedly. Her personality now underwent a great transformation. She entirely threw away all the restrictive influences she experienced from the world so far. The grave schoolteacher ‘imparting knowledge’ to the pupils gave way now to the ‘real educator’ guiding her pupils step by step towards a world of new discoveries (26). Her object was now to develop new personalities full of candour and confidence. Her new method of education consisted in playing with the children between four and six years of age, thus allowing them freedom to express their inherent urges in accordance with each one’s inner harmony. Free from

all restrictions, they now set themselves to create various things according to their ingenuity. Margaret would suggest games in which the keener student could encourage the duller ones, and would tell stories that drew the attention of even the difficult students. She made the children discover their own geniuses by rightly appreciating their creations. But the children failed to know how they progressed with an invisible hand of their beloved teacher behind all their endeavours.

Through her free association with the children Margaret discovered many more facts about them. This added her insight about child education day by day. She often spoke in meetings, demanding a complete liberty of expression for the child. She boldly declared, 'The child's worst enemies are overfond parents whose love is possessive and exclusive, or their first teachers who compel them to follow their own conception of life without troubling about the child's own individuality' (27). And she bolstered her knowledge with her keen observations on the children and a number of case-records.

Soon Margaret opened her own school, the Ruskin School at Wimbledon, teaching not only children but also adults who wished to study the modern educational methods. Thus all her efforts and successes invisibly led Margaret to the long-awaited task of her life set by the Divine. Her honest and candid search after Truth made her knock at many doors of individuals and groups of faith, but everywhere she discovered the undercurrents of intolerance, hatred, and the old bogey of sectarianism. She wanted to get at the spiritual Truth, which was of prime significance to her above all other goals.

### ***The Historic Meeting***

At long last the Messiah could not but respond to her inner call and did come. 'What matters is intense yearning. Everything is bound to take

shape in the ripeness of time,' Sri Ramakrishna used to say.<sup>5</sup> Through some acquaintance Margaret learnt of a Hindu Yogi who had been invited by Lady Isabel Margesson to speak at her residence. She went there just to appease her curiosity. There, amid a fifteen-strong audience, sat Swami Vivekananda with a regal bearing and other-worldly look. The talk commenced; but it was not a mere talk. A feeling of complete emptiness gradually engulfed Margaret, annihilating her will power and critical sense, followed by a new force making her mind reach out to broader and vaster regions. The Yogi's voice reverberated like a distant echo in the minds of all present: 'Man the infinite dreamer, dreaming finite dreams!'<sup>6</sup> 'All our struggle is really for freedom. We seek neither misery nor happiness, but freedom' (250). He lifted the hearts of the hearers into eternity.

The lecture ended. Margaret's heart was filled with profound peace. She felt that the truth she was seeking so long had come close to her. Yet she was not to give in without further test. So she started asking questions along with others at the end of each of the parlour talks she attended. Swamiji also gave satisfactory replies to all the queries untiringly. He was well aware of the capacity of his questioners, and so he slowly lifted their minds far beyond their limits of intellect into the spiritual realm. Margaret found herself struggling to feel her own way. Swamiji sensed this, and described to her in detail all the stages in spiritual life, from the faithful worshipper protected by the rites of his church or sect, to the worshipper projected into the freedom of the realised soul. He taught Margaret the joy of renunciation, of love bereft of all possessiveness, of becoming a patient instrument of God's will. Margaret could only vaguely feel the idea of freedom; yet she did not give up her power of reason, for reason works only within the intellectual

level which she was yet to transcend. And in the course of the question-answer session she discovered a religion that could smilingly bear the onslaught of scientific reasoning, while maintaining contact between spiritual and practical life, and which relied exclusively on the noblest and best traits in mankind.

After Swamiji left for America in November 1895, Margaret got the opportunity of thinking in a free mind. She studied his teaching sufficiently to become convinced of its coherence. His words kept reverberating in her brain, 'The universe is like a cobweb and minds are the spiders;' 'while no religion was true in the way commonly claimed, yet all were equally true in a very real way;' 'God, really Impersonal, seen through the mists of sense become Personal;' 'the spirit behind an act was more powerful than the act itself.'<sup>7</sup> Margaret pondered over them and plunged deep into them by studying, one after the other, the Gita, Upanishads, Buddhist philosophy beside her own. At times, merged in those intricate systems, she would lose heart; but the Swami's words would ring in her ears, 'Never feel yourself forsaken. Do you know how God dwells in man? He hides Himself like a Hindu lady of noble birth behind a lattice curtain. He is always there, like that lady who sees everything, though no one suspects her presence.'<sup>8</sup>

When Swamiji returned to London in April 1896, he found Margaret completely transformed. She was prepared to meet the Swami with a series of questions. The Swami was satisfied to find Margaret in the same state as he was for six long years fighting with his Master. In her personal interviews with the Swami Margaret spoke of her experience among the miners at Wrexham. The Swami listened with interest, and interpreted that experience of hers in spiritual terms. Encouraged at the Swami's words she also took him to her own school and spoke

warmly of her aims and efforts. 'Every day I discover new elements. These children are free, but several of them are slow to develop because I do not know how to neutralize, quickly enough, the complexes which impede them. The child, in itself, is an entire science. ... Each has a right to complete self-expression. That is the essential condition of development which I offer them' (48). The Swami wept with joy. 'Ah,' he said,

my poor, poor children of India who are abandoned to the blackest ignorance. Their lot is so lamentable that they imagine they are born to be oppressed by all those who have money. They have completely lost their individuality. Can you imagine their misery? Even if we could give them free education in every village, the poor children would be forced to work in the fields to earn their living rather than attend school. We have no money and we cannot educate them. The problem seems hopeless, but I am searching for a solution. ... If the poor cannot come to school, the school must go to them, to the plough, to the factory, everywhere. (ibid.).

### ***The Resolve and the Call***

Margaret felt she could assist the Swami in a thousand ways and offered her own lifetime service for those neglected and suffering people in India. She at last declared herself a disciple of Swami Vivekananda by addressing him as 'Master'. The Swami knew that her resolve was not a mere outburst of emotion. He recognised her as the woman she was to become. He saw her beyond her ego and limitations, rich with the reserves she herself did not know, acknowledged the leonine strength of her character and her candid faith in Truth. So he wrote to her on 7 June 1896: 'The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. ... you have the making in you of a world-mover. ... Bold words and bolder deeds are what we want' (7501).

Yet he wanted to caution her in every way



from the dark and unknown path she was going to tread voluntarily. After his return to India Swamiji wrote to her on 29 July 1897 with a little more emphasis, speaking aloud his thoughts about her while warning against the odds that might stand on her way:

Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman—a real lioness—to work for the Indians, women specially. ... Yet the difficulties are many. You cannot form any idea of misery, the superstition, and the slavery that are here. You will be in the midst of a mass of half-naked men and women with quaint ideas of caste and isolation, shunning the white skin through fear or hatred and hated by them intensely. On the other hand, you will be looked upon by the white as a crank, and every one of your movements will be watched with suspicion. ... on my part I promise you, I will stand by you unto death whether you work for India or not, whether you give up Vedanta or remain in it. “*The tusks of the elephant come out, but never go back.*” (7.511–2).

These words of assurance which followed the forewarning deepened Margaret’s resolve. She had already prepared herself to struggle till death. So, feeling her genuineness and dauntless spirit, Swamiji again wrote to her on 1 October 1897 much more expressly of his readings about her: ‘Many feel, but only a few can express. It is the power of expressing one’s love and appreciation and sympathy for others, that enables one person to succeed better in spreading the idea than others’ (8.428). Margaret was long waiting for a positive nod from her Master. So she set sail for India for the first time by *S S Mombasa* sometime during December 1897 and landed on Calcutta port on 28 January 1898 where Swamiji was waiting with one of his brother disciples and a large crowd to greet the new guest.

### Training of the Disciple

In the meantime, Mrs Sara Ole Bull and Miss MacLeod, who had already been acquainted with Margaret, came to India to see for themselves the real spirit of India. They were accommodated in the Belur Math guest house, now known as Leggett House. At their interest Margaret was also invited there now and then to feel at ease in the new environment. Swamiji would join the party, alone or with some of the novices at the Math, and unleash sublime ideas that rose in his mind. He would speak highly of the religious ardour of Indian people and called upon his disciples to spur the masses to action so as to make them realise their inherent latent abilities. ‘Let each one understand that he is divine! Let them learn and know it. Let us awake! Let us arise and tell them’ (74). And his teaching, particularly to Margaret, was: ‘Open your hearts wide to receive the treasure of the poor. For them you are like God Himself entering their house’ (76).

But Margaret had come to India with the definite purpose of opening a school for girls. Swamiji did not give her any instruction about it. As time passed by, she grew impatient; still Swamiji showed no sign of that. Instead, he only said, ‘Look at what is going on around you. ... Don’t make any plans. That is not your job’ (77). He only wanted her to learn by herself the secret of the right attitude to adopt. Blinded by her desire to succeed, Margaret failed to understand the first lesson India wanted to teach her: to live in the present and to find out the secret of disinterested work by giving up her own will. He also asked her to expect nothing from the future and to attach no value to the sacrifice of her life. It was a new field where her earlier progressive method of education would not work. Swamiji wanted her not to become merely a charitable missionary worker but a full-fledged Hindu woman before becoming an educator of

the Hindu women. She must acquire knowledge of all that a Hindu woman inherits at birth. With this purpose in view Swamiji told her the stories of Sita, Savitri, Gargi, Maitreyi, Mirabai, Ahalya, and such others. Giving up her uncontrolled impulses, she must take up as model the quiet and modest attitude of the Hindu woman. In other words, the lioness must first get special training to love the lamb—not in disguise but in reality—if situation demands. This process of replacing the non-essential elements in her personality with the new ideas was no doubt a very unsettling one. He wanted her to submit to all the restrictions and limitations imposed upon women in India until she understood their sense and value. Then he taught her the secret of entering into the solitude of the soul, the perfect silence. No one at that time realised that Swamiji's purpose of training her into absolute mental obedience was to inspire her with total liberty of action. He would instruct his fellow monks, 'Never restrict her liberty. What do *you* know about what I have given her?' (79). He wanted to provide her with the necessary power, and with a full certitude in setting out for her goal.

Margaret's preconceived notions about her Master received a jolt when she discovered him, in the course of her training, as an authoritative instructor who possessed a suppleness that made him almost incomprehensible. It was in wide contrast with what she found in him in London—a grave, measured, delicate personality. This moment he would preach the purest monastic life; the next moment he would glide into what she felt the crudest 'manifestations of superstition' (80) with the same indifference. Initially she found it difficult to reconcile the two contrasting personalities in her Master. Yet, amid all such conflicts of opposites, one salient feature always came out: as soon as Swamiji appeared before the people, a wave of love was released to flow over

and through all around him. This idea was accentuated when she discovered him in a new form in the house of Nava Gopal Ghosh in connection with the consecration of the shrine therein. Swamiji was in the centre of a group, dancing like a mad man, completely lost in joy, and intoxicated with love, to the accompaniment of devotional song and other musical instruments. The emotion came like frenzy upon all present and engulfed them. It was a totally unprecedented sight to her! As the procession drew up in front of the house, Swamiji prostrated himself in the dust, smearing his head with ashes, and then went to set up Sri Ramakrishna in the shrine.

One day Swamiji was explaining to her the role of the guru who is above the father and mother, the friend, the spiritual instructor, who knows the disciple's most intimate thoughts in seed form, and so on, Margaret hid her face in her hands and gave way to the tumults of the long-hidden questions within her. The Master understood her unspoken questions and yet kept quiet. She was soon to get all the answers. On 11 March 1898 Swamiji, in order to make her acquainted with the elite of the Bengali society, asked her to speak at the Star Theatre on 'The Influence of Indian Thought in England'. It was her debut speech in India before a Bengali audience. Swamiji introduced her to the audience and she passed the test to the satisfaction of her Master who smiled in pride of the disciple's grand success. Thus Swamiji crossed the first milestone in establishing Margaret in the Bengali society. Now remained the second hurdle to cross, namely, to see her acceptability by the orthodox womenfolk of Bengal.

### ***Initiation into a New Life***

The birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna was celebrated in the last week of February, 1898. At the interest of Swamiji the festival was arranged

on a large scale that year with special worship in the temple, religious discourses, devotional songs, processions, and so on, which gave the occasion added brilliance. From morning till dusk poor people by thousands were fed sumptuously under the careful supervision of the monks and volunteers. The air was full of the sweet smell of incense sticks, perfumeries, and echoes of shouts of glory in the name of Sri Ramakrishna, the great Master. A more intimate ceremony also took place behind the common gaze the next dawn, signalling the occasion. Swamiji initiated fifty novitiates belonging to the three castes in Hinduism—Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra—into the life-long vow of celibacy by initiating them with the Gayatri mantra. It was a daring attack on the orthodox scholars. Yet, as if it was not enough, Swamiji went one step forward, and declared boldly that the Vedas have given clear injunction to the effect that such ordination could also be given to fit recipients, even if one were a foreigner. Earlier, on several occasions, he had raised the question, ‘Who is an *arya* or a *mleccha*—the man who lives within the shell of his pride, or the man who, over and above race and caste divisions, brings a universal interpretation to the highest truths?’ (86). To emphasise his assertion he asked, ‘Who was Nanak? Who was Chaitanya? Who was Kabir? Who was Dadu? Who were all these great preachers, one following the other, a galaxy of stars of the first magnitude? Did not Ramanuja feel for the lower classes? Did he not try all his life to admit even the Pariah to his community? Did he not try to admit even Mohammedans to his own fold? Did not Nanak confer with Hindus and Mohammedans, and try to bring about a new state of things?’<sup>9</sup> In this way Swamiji widened the scope of the meaning of the Vedas. And why should he not? He had already read the English commentaries of the Vedas and other sacred books of the East by Max Müller; he

was well acquainted with the Vedantic thoughts of Paul Deussen, Maurice Bloomfield, Monier Williams, and many such foreigners who looked upon the wisdom of the Vedas as the beacon light on their path. So, in order to give a concrete shape to his conviction, Swamiji decided to confer the vow of brahmacharya to his Irish disciple Margaret. About a month after the birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna, he ordained her into that stage of life in the presence of the two American ladies—Sara C Bull, and Josephine MacLeod—on 25 March 1898. It was arranged in a makeshift shanty—no more in existence now—adjacent to the building known as Nilambar Babu’s Bungalow, or the ‘old Math’. She now became a full-fledged brahmacharini, so as to be in the same rank as her future Indian students who led austere life. And, as we have seen earlier, she received the special name ‘Nivedita’. Was it a mere coincidence that Swamiji gave her this name? Long ago, during Margaret’s birth, her mother, in the travail of



her baby's birth, had dedicated the baby to God. This was a critical moment in her life when all she had been, and all she was, became crystallised into an act of total submission to Swami Vivekananda, her guru. Margaret was now conscious of what she was sacrificing—her life itself. She realised that henceforth her body, mind, and intellect would no more belong to her anymore; that the preceptor would now mould her character in his own hands like a potter shaping a clod of clay. Thus before presenting her to the Holy Mother Swamiji sanctified her in body, mind, and spirit.

That day, after the spiritual fervour was over, Swamiji rose to speak to Nivedita what she had been patiently waiting to hear. He revealed his long-cherished dream to her. Pointing to the opposite bank of the Ganges he said, 'Nivedita, that is where I should like to have a convent for women. Like a bird that needs two wings to fly, India must have both educated men and educated women.'<sup>10</sup> So he gave order to the navigator even before she had taken the helm.

The next thing Swamiji did was to introduce her to the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi along with Mrs Bull and Miss MacLeod. He wanted to acquaint Nivedita with the intimate household of an orthodox Hindu widow, to feel that sparkling joy which radiated from the Holy Mother. At the same time Swamiji was apprehensive on whether the Holy Mother would accept the foreign guests. Her acceptance would make a landmark to bridge the gulf between the East and the West. But in case she did not, all the noble efforts of Swamiji would be nipped in the bud. Which way would the scale bend? He sent the ladies upstairs to the Mother's room and himself stayed behind. The Holy Mother, with her natural serenity, surprised the foreigners by ordering in low voice for some fruits, sweets, and a cup of milk. But some more surprise was waiting. The Mother started eating with her children from overseas by

breaking all barriers of vapid orthodoxy. When Swamiji came to know of this historic event, he was beyond himself in joy. Mother's acceptance meant to him the acceptance of the entire society! And Mother did not stop there! Through a woman who knew English she started conversing with her Christian daughters asking intimate questions such as: How the Lord is worshipped in their houses, what homage He is paid, are their parents still alive, and so on. And at long last she greeted Nivedita, 'My daughter, I am glad you came' (97). Bathed in tears, Nivedita felt blessed.

This acceptance became the talk of the neighbourhood and Nivedita was accepted by the women as one of them. But a still greater surprise was waiting to amaze the three foreign ladies. Their next destination was the residence of Gopal Ma, an orthodox, devout Brahmin widow, who looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as her chosen deity Gopala. In the course of time her eyes could only see Gopala in every soul. When the ladies went to meet her, she saw her beloved Gopala in each of them, and as she could not speak English, she expressed the warmth of her sympathy by holding the hands of her foreign friends and stroking them. She loved them all equally, but felt a stronger bond with Nivedita. With her she told her beads that evening by the Ganges.

### ***Knowing India in Depth***

The next task at hand was to acquaint Nivedita with India as a whole. On 11 May the party with the three foreign ladies and four monks joined the Swami in their journey via Nainital to Almora. Swamiji looked at his motherland with the eyes of an artist, a poet, and with the sensibility of a mystic. He was able to explain to his foreign disciples how custom and religion are one and the same thing. He wanted them to see India through his eyes. He pointed out that every theme of life in India was like a prayer



of the soul. To him the Hindu greeting the sun thrice a day, and the Muslim bowing five times to Allah are the epitome of Indian life and culture.

At Nainital they were allowed to visit the temple of Naina Devi by courtesy of the Raja Ajit Singh of Khetri. There, among the local crowd, were two young women draped with jewellery and richly dressed. They pleaded to see Swamiji. But the crowd protested, calling them prostitutes. Eventually the accompanying monks made way for the two at the behest of Swamiji. On reaching Swamiji they prostrated before him, and laid several pieces of gold at his feet as a contribution to his work. He blessed them, spoke a few words of tenderness, and sent them away without any vestige of reproach or condemnation. Nivedita felt something welling up within her; she wished to put herself in the place of those women and receive the manna of compassion from the looks of Swamiji.

After they reached Almora Swamiji again put Nivedita to a severe test. He wanted her to stand alone, face to face with herself without any external support, even from her guru; to find peace with the fervour of renunciation. He was convinced that the leonine spirit of Nivedita would surmount all obstacles to reach the summit of spirituality. So he withdrew himself from her. Failing to understand this, the disciple got irritated. So far all her endeavours hovered round her Master. She did everything for the love of her guru. But Swamiji just disliked that. He wanted her to be more impersonal in her efforts. So, initially she reacted with obstinacy. A great war was going on within her. She felt abandoned. The more she fought with herself and tried to analyse, the more she was brought back to the subtle attachment to her guru. Swamiji wanted to eradicate that ruthlessly in order to free her mind to work in her own field. On the other hand she wanted to assume the role of Mary at the feet of

Jesus. This was the main reason of the conflict. The tension between the two rose to such a degree that Mrs Bull had to come between them at last for a truce. Swamiji listened without a reply. That evening he came back and, addressing the three ladies, said, 'You were right. There must be a change. I am going away into the forests to be alone; and when I come back, I shall bring peace.'<sup>11</sup> And he kept his words. After his return he blessed Nivedita with raised hands and said, 'Let us also with the new moon begin a new life!' (ibid.) After he had left, Nivedita felt that her sorrow had also left her. She felt a new life springing up within her. All the previous conflicts were resolved by themselves.

Through this act Swamiji transformed Nivedita into one who loved India for itself and could enter into the life of its people without caring for disapproval, comparison, or even comment. Nivedita had looked upon India from outside till now, comparing her new experiences with what she had heard before. But Swamiji perceived that an entirely new problem had arisen in India, with the Western civilisation superimposing upon India's ancient national heritage. They offered the Indians the prospect of a modern life completely dissociated from the foundations of their religion. And Nivedita was not aware of this. So she pitied the wretched folk of India and talked, like many other foreigners, about charity and funds to be raised. But her Master said sharply to her, 'All I want you to see is that, with the majority of people, charity is nothing but the expression of an egoistic interest.'<sup>12</sup> 'You will have to set yourself to Hinduism. Your thoughts, your deeds, your conceptions, your habits ... Your life, internal and external, will have to become all that an orthodox brahman *Brahmacharini's* ought to be. ... you have to forget your own past, and cause it to be forgotten. You have to lose even its memory!' (122). Thus

Swamiji offered her to Kali, and there his duty towards her ended. He left the party for some time, but left his significant message to Nivedita: 'Mother, Mother! Call upon Her! She will come because you belong to Her. But be ready to welcome Her when She takes hold of you' (129). Nivedita followed the advice in submission, and started worshipping that Kali who passes when the waves roar, the mountains shake; life and death are stirred up in Her creative movement. With one hand She snatches, with the other She blesses. She smiles at him who sees Shiva dancing in the sunlight of dawn. She is the point of balance in the continual interplay of powers! Gradually her verbal prayers gave way to the feeling of movement of Kali springing up within her. Nivedita's whole being was uplifted towards Her, and she saw spirit and matter wedded together like the sun and the earth. The divine Mother then started speaking from within her: 'Shrink not from defeat; embrace despair. Uproot every interest that would conflict with mine. Look for no mercy for thyself, and I shall make thee bearer of great vessels of mercy to others' (131).

### ***The Real Work Begins***

A real silence came over Nivedita now, brushing aside all cravings. She had become her Mother's doll. The party at Kashmir broke up at Swamiji's suggestion. Nivedita returned to Calcutta with renewed vigour to plunge into the practical experience of Hindu life. And now Swamiji clearly told her that, like many other preoccupations of his, he was thinking of Nivedita's work! He wanted to know of her plan of work. Nivedita was delighted. But when she gave him a picture of it as an experiment based on religious life of the Hindu women *and the cult of Sri Ramakrishna*, Swamiji rebuffed: 'You will make a sect in order to rise above all sects, isn't that it? Yes, I understand.' Later he added,

'You ask me to criticize your plan, but that I cannot do. For I regard you as inspired, quite as much inspired as I am. So I shall help you do what you think best' (134).

Nivedita was then taken to Baghbazar to spend a fortnight with the Holy Mother Sarada Devi, and at the same time make preparations for the future life as a yogini. She observed and followed the house-hold daily schedule of Mother, which was far more than rigorous austerity for her western body and mind, and at last Mother gave her permission with blessings to leave and start her own mission. 'Now, your work is about to begin' (141). The house where she was taken in stood almost next door to the Mother's. All the women in the Mother's household, including Gopaler Ma, even all the neighbours, bade her goodbye standing on their doorways. It was the house number 16, Bose Para Lane.

On 12 November 1898, Kali Puja day, she opened her school. It was part of the plan for the women's convent Swamiji hoped to build up. Her first pupils were three puny and timid little Hindu girls. Its schedule of lessons was entirely irregular, since the children did not come at set hours. Even its plan was not definitely formed. The Holy Mother was its first guest of honour. Accompanied by several women, she arrived, whispered a blessing for the school. She was followed by Swamiji and two other monks. He pointed out to Nivedita, 'And your own work among the women is important. Stir them up! The manhood of Europe was kept up by the women who hated unmanliness. When will Bengali girls play their part and drown in merciless ridicule every display of feebleness on the part of men?' (154) 'You are going to learn everything from your pupils' (162). And to achieve this end, he never stopped short of setting a rigorous regime for his disciple. 'Never complain of not having enough time for prayer and meditation. ... You must unite within

yourself the practical spirit and culture of the perfect citizen, with love of poverty, purity, and complete abandonment of self. Those are the condition under which your faith will blossom. Reveal your unlimited power after you yourself have completely renounced it. ... A stern *tapasya* [austerity] will discipline you. ... My mission is not Ramakrishna's, nor Vedanta's, nor anything but simply to bring manhood to this people' (153).

The three girls were so shy that whenever anyone so much as looked at them they hid their faces in their hands. If they were spoken to, tears would fill their eyes. But they did not run away, and were glad to stay in 'Sister's house'. And Nivedita welcomed them as her teachers. It was Sri Ramakrishna's way of gaining the in-depth knowledge of Christianity, Islam, and other religions by living in every detail like them. Nivedita watched them living their own life unwatched by others. They were irregular in their attendance. She observed that they were most familiar with acts of worship; they made some unknown image with clay and would offer flower petals to it; yet they played with it like a doll, lulling it to sleep; and when their game was over, they would smash it into tiny bits. In imitation of the house ladies, they would carry jugs full of water on the head without spilling a drop, play good hostess, bowing to imaginary guests with mimicry, and so on. She observed that the Hindu child had a concrete awareness of life. Their mothers had made them learn by heart countless episodes from the epics. They also knew how to conduct themselves with dignity and find their places in the family hierarchy.

Each of the children was given a particular task. They learnt unconsciously to relate the three R's—reading, writing, and arithmetic—with time and space in a playful spirit, instead of swallowing them like parrots. They discovered the relation between thoughts and words describing

nature, and the value of numbers. Gradually the number of students swelled to thirty by March 1899. The Holy Mother took special interest in the school, made enquiries in every detail, and would often visit on special days to distribute sweets to the children. None of the children paid the monthly fee of one rupee; instead, Nivedita had to provide them with clothing, medical treatment, and everything. Miss MacLeod came one day on a visit and played the whole day with the children while keeping her gaze at everything lacking in the household. Next day she came again with a large supply of provisions for the children and even for Nivedita.

In the meantime, Calcutta was affected once again with bubonic plague. Every day people died by hundreds. Swamiji set aside all other cares and engaged Nivedita and two of his monastic disciples for a practical aid with the health measures to one and all, irrespective of caste prejudices. Sweepers were badly needed. She had been patiently waiting for her turn to wage an implacable war. So she forthwith set herself to this risky task along with the brother-monks. The list of desiderata seemed unending: nurse, vaccine, medicine, and so on. She went through the localities making survey, preparing lists of needs; she opened a makeshift dispensary for treating

House at 16 Bosepara Lane





patients; organised groups of volunteers under the guidance of Swami Sadananda to continue the cleaning campaign. The whole work was done so enthusiastically by the people themselves that when the government health official came to inspect the area, he found that everything needed had been accomplished long before. The volunteers raised money from the public by groups, distributed disinfectants to the houses. Nivedita had given them a new concept for civic life through the practice of self-sacrifice. She too joined hands with them to the extent of scavenging the lanes when initially the neighbouring ladies did not yield to her hygienic suggestions.

At long last, Swamiji decided to ordain her into a naishtika brahmacharini, a title which gave her the lifelong dignity of a nun on Saturday, 25 March 1898 at Belur Math old shrine. It was a landmark

Swami Sadananda (1865–1911)



in her life. She felt purified from all sufferings, and became the representation of love bereft of servitude. Her guru said to her: 'It is when half-a-dozen people learn to love like this that a new religion begins. ... Give me half a dozen disciples like that, and I will conquer the world' (160–1).

In this way Nivedita offered her life to the service of India. She became a truly Hindu in every respect. Benefactors of India from the foreign lands are no less in number today, but such a soul will be rare indeed who lives the life of the afflicted while having a regal spirit within. This is called real empathy, this was the ideal of all the Indian kings, and it is here that all her success lay—in harmonising the dormant lion spirit with the mellowed nature of lamb; in making worthy women and also men for India, and above all, in becoming identified with the Indian soul.

PB

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# The Thrice Dedicated

Pravrajika Ajayaprana

THE YOUNG LADY was having this experience for the first time. She was with a child. Her mind was full of apprehension, anxiety, and great concern as to how the whole programme would end. A God-loving person that she was, she sent an ardent prayer to the great Lord that if all went well with her delivery she would dedicate the newborn babe for His service. Thus even when she was in her mother's womb she had already been offered at the feet of God. Margaret Noble's life that slowly unfolded later was a concrete proof of the genuineness of her mother's vow. This was the first 'Dedication' of that fortunate soul for the service of God.<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Elizabeth Noble was born in Ireland on 28 October 1867. Samuel Richmond, her father, was a preacher in North Ireland. Little Margaret had a sister, May, and a brother, Richmond afterwards. But Margaret, his first offspring, happened to be her father's favourite. She was a constant companion for him when he conducted the Church services and looked after the poor entrusted to his care. Thus, in her childhood itself the little girl imbibed a great interest in religion and in helping the poor and the needy wherever needed. Her grandfather had taken part in some political movements centering around the freedom of Ireland. Hence Margaret also inherited the spirit of freedom and loyalty to her homeland.

It is said that once a friend of Samuel

Richmond visited him one day. That gentleman had been working as a preacher in India. He was very much impressed by the smart little girl, Margaret. Casually as it were, he told Samuel that on growing up this girl would go to India and work for the people there. Strange, isn't it? For in course of time this prediction really actualised.

After her school and college studies Margaret began to take interest in teaching. She had a great leaning towards the new method of teaching introduced by the Swiss teacher Pestalozzi and his German follower Froebel. According to this method the education of little children was to start by allowing them to indulge in 'exercise, play, observation, imitation, and construction'<sup>2</sup> and thus promoting their innate tendencies to develop naturally. Through this novel education programme conducted in London Margaret became acquainted with some great personalities of the then British society. She also joined the Sunday club where she became well-known through her talks and writings. Among her acquaintances were Lady Ripon and Lady Isabel Margesson. The last mentioned became the medium through which Margaret met her future Master, Swami Vivekananda.

Lady Margesson had the habit of inviting many eminent personalities who appeared in the London society, to her drawing room for evening sessions. The 'Hindu Yogi'<sup>3</sup> was one among them. A few of her friends had been invited. Margaret also got an invitation to be a participant of this gathering of the intellectually

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advanced and forward thinking people. Swamiji gave a beautiful talk—quite interesting—but not impressive enough to get full appreciation from his audience. The general sentiment was, ‘It was not new’ (ibid.). But on reaching home, while being engaged in her household chores, many of the ideas that came from the monk began to thrust themselves forward in Margaret’s mind. Slowly she began to feel the truth and the power behind his thoughts. She found herself attending all his lectures with avidity and enthusiasm. At last she ended by accepting him as her ‘Master’.

Swamiji was greatly impressed by the personality and character of this English devotee of his. By degrees he began to feel that she could become a powerful tool in bringing into actuality

his dream of the great programme for the emancipation of the women of India. Accordingly, one day she was summoned by her guru to travel to India to help him to do his work there. Soon she found herself on the soil of his motherland. She began to live in a small house in Baghbazar, a quiet part of Kolkata. She had to put up with innumerable difficulties, but she went through all of them with a serene heart and perfect peace. Seeing her complete identification with the work for the women of India, Swamiji one day offered her at the feet of God, giving her the name of ‘Nivedita’, the ‘Dedicated’. This was the second ‘Dedication’ in her life.

In the meantime Nivedita had started on a small scale a school for girls in her own house,



which later developed into a major institution. Its nunnery section later became the nucleus of Sri Sarada Math, a women monastic organisation following the ideal of Sri Ramakrishna.

Slowly the Sister's field of interest began to widen its horizon. She felt a great yearning to encourage the revival of ancient Indian art. She wrote in a letter: "The Rebirth of the National art is my dearest dream. When India gets back her old art, she will be on the eve of becoming a strong nation."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, she inspired many artists in their work and also encouraged many others to study the paintings in the caves of Ajanta and Ellora. She also wanted India to go forward with scientific research and thereby gain a front rank along with the other progressive countries of the world. J C Bose was one of the scientists whom she helped a lot.

Nivedita had believed that her own country England and her adopted land India were friendly with each other. But her own personal experience, when she actually began to live in India, shattered her belief. She began to visit many of the cities in India inspiring the people therein to become more patriotic and work towards gaining independence from the British power. She did not actively take part in any of the agitations, or movements, but was a powerful influence and inspiration behind many of the active participants in the freedom struggle. Her call was: "No More words, words, words! Let us have deeds, deeds, deeds!"<sup>5</sup> Thus she dedicated herself in many ways for the welfare of India. She was putting into practice her Master's words, "For the next fifty years this alone shall be our keynote—this, our great Mother India. Let all other vain gods disappear for the time from our minds. This is the only god that is awake, our own race—"everywhere his hands, everywhere his feet, everywhere his ears, he covers everything." ... When we have worshipped this, we

shall be able to worship all the other gods."<sup>6</sup> This was her third 'Dedication'—solely from herself and completely her own. PB

## References

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## ***Sister Nivedita's Battle for Indian Ideals in America***

**Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana**

**W**E GOT THERE AT 8 [o'clock].<sup>1</sup> Nivedita wrote, "Time and place were alike delightful. Overhead the stars,

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and around—the rolling Ganges; and on one side stood the dimly lighted building; with its background of palms and lofty shade-trees.<sup>2</sup> Nivedita, arriving by boat, waited at the landing. She wrote: "The King [Swami Vivekananda] had been sitting beside the fire under the tree ... and



he came to me there, as I felt that it was a little late for a lady to visit monks.<sup>3</sup> Sister Nivedita had gone to the Belur Math to interview Swamiji for *Prabuddha Bharata*. During the interview, she brought up the subject of her girls' school: 'and it's really to be a monastic order and not a series of concessions to the feeble-hearted,' he said (*ibid.*). She had made a brief attempt to open her school in Calcutta but could not continue it for lack of funds. Now she was determined to make an attempt to earn money to reopen it by lecturing in the West.

Nivedita later explained to someone who interviewed her: 'My object is to educate the Hindu girl as the English and American girl is being educated, without any impertinent interference with her religious beliefs or social customs. We make a serious mistake in such interference. The Hindoos are far in advance of us in social problems. As a people they are on a much higher level intellectually and spiritually.'<sup>4</sup>

Margaret Noble, to whom Swamiji fittingly gave the name Nivedita, the dedicated, in her efforts to raise funds for her educational project, was to fight a hard battle for the reputation of India in the West. Nivedita's heroic deeds in India are known: a project for the national education of the future of a whole race of women, instilling hands on help to Indian geniuses in every field, in politics, in science, literature, and in art. But what is equally amazing is the zeal with which she counterattacked the fallen image of India in the West made there by Christian Missionaries and Pandita Ramabai a generation earlier.

Nivedita lectured in America for eight months from November 1899 to June 1900. Soon Nivedita found she had a message for the West, just as Swamiji found when he arrived in the West, with a similar purpose of raising funds for his projects in India. But in trying to follow

his footsteps, Nivedita found at first, that some people resented her. She found her own message only after a bitter struggle. In India her lectures had been successful. Indians were eager to hear from an eloquent English disciple of Swamiji, reinforcing their appreciation of their own culture. In America, however, although she began to lecture where Swamiji did, and staying among his friends, thinking the audiences would have been prepared for her, she often found antagonism. It was one thing to hear defences 'of India from an Indian, but what authority did this foreign lady have?'<sup>5</sup>

Nivedita thinking, at first, that she would tackle Swamiji's opponents, took up from where he left off. Pandita Ramabai, an Indian woman who had converted to Christianity and after traveling widely in India, she had observed the condition of Indian women and began to lecture and write about them. She had publicised the idea that Hindu widows were treated by Indian society like the Negro slaves were, in America. Speaking of only the sordid conditions of Indian women, Ramabai had played upon the sympathy of Americans to collect funds so she could start a school for child widows in India. She married, had a daughter and soon became a widow, herself. Throughout the US she founded Ramabai Circles to raise money from influential people. This seems all well and good. However, Ramabai did more harm than good to India: in order to elicit the sympathy of Americans, especially women, Ramabai painted a highly exaggerated and most pathetic picture of the condition of women in India. Swami Vivekananda going to America after her, on the contrary, only preached the noble ideals of Indian women. He said in a lecture at the Brooklyn Ethical Association of Dr Lewis Janes that 'Hindu wives and widows were protected by law to a greater extent than were nineteenth century American women,'<sup>6</sup> and 'the

“help” given by the Christian missionaries and ... that given by the Ramabai Circle. ... was worse than none, for it sapped the self-respect of the nation which received it and thus served to ruin rather than to restore’ (2.324).

A whole generation of Americans had been influenced not only by Ramabai, but by Christian missionary propaganda, preaching that Western culture and society were superior to Indian culture, and depicted Indians as barbaric. This belief had given sanction to Western imperialism. Nivedita had written to her confidante, Josephine MacLeod from her ship, on 21 July on her way to America:

My notion is to take deliberately all those towns in America where Ramabai has attacked Swami—and to go there AS NUN completely and give say 3 days’ lectures—‘What I have seen in India’ some such title and deliberately acknowledge perhaps that the reports of R’s [Ramabai’s] presence there had made me feel the bond of a common interest—and propose, flatly, that they should finance my work to the limit of their power.

My message will not be political or social—apart from the fact that I love Hinduism with my whole heart and soul, and have not ONE flaw to find in it.<sup>7</sup>

Nivedita asked Miss MacLeod to get a list of Ramabai’s places and costs of travel and if necessary to make some definite engagements for her. She wrote: ‘Swami has just come and I have told him of the Ramabai motif—would it do? “Possibly,” he says “Do what you like.” To start counter-circles first in *her* territory seems to me sound policy’ (1.189). Nivedita wrote to Swami Akhandananda: ‘You must ask Sri Ramakrishna to let me be of some real use to Him, as well as my girls. I am sure He will let me find the money I want for them.’ (1.195). Again, she wrote to Miss MacLeod: ‘Work like this requires persons like you

and myself who have no other object or thought in life’ (1.201).

Nivedita had a few strong supporters among Swamiji’s followers to start: Mrs Ole Bull of Boston, who was Swamiji’s main supporter, Sarah Farmer who was Mrs Bull’s co-worker and friend and the originator of the Greenacre, Maine retreat centre, ‘Betty’ (Besse) Leggett, whose guest Nivedita was in New York. Betty, the sister of Josephine MacLeod and wife of a millionaire, contributed a thousand dollars. When Sara Bull, with her American sense of organisation, formed ‘The Ramakrishna Guild of Help’ in America for the purpose of raising funds for Nivedita’s proposed widows’ and girls’ home and school in Calcutta, Betty became its President and Mrs Bull, its national Secretary. There were Vice-Presidents and Secretaries representing different cities: Josephine MacLeod and Vivekananda’s devotee, the famous opera-singer, Emma Thursby, were Secretaries in New York, Mr Mead and Edna Cheney in Boston, Thomas Higginson, Lewis Janes, and Marion Briggs in Cambridge, and Christina Greenstidel in Detroit. The Project of the Ramakrishna School for Girls was published as a booklet through Mr Leggett. In it, the following plan was written:

We intend, if we succeed in acquiring means, to buy a house and piece of land on the banks of the Ganges, near Calcutta, and there take in some twenty widows and twenty orphan girls—the whole community to be under the guidance and authority of that Sarada Devi, whose name has been lately introduced to the world by Professor Max Muller in his ‘Life and Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna’ ...

We ask each child to choose for herself the life of marriage or of consecrated national service. For those who choose the first, we shall hope to provide ways and means that are entirely creditable. With any who may prefer to devote their lives to unremitting toil on behalf of their

country and her womanhood, we shall expect, after an extended education, and using the older women as guard and protectors, to start new Ramakrishna schools in other centres.<sup>8</sup>

From Betty's country home, Ridgely Manor in the Catskill Mountains of New York State, Nivedita decided to go first to Chicago to lecture, hoping to raise funds there. Betty Leggett's daughter, Alberta and Mr Ole Bull's daughter, Olea, graciously invited Nivedita to join them on the journey to Chicago, where Swamiji had many friends. Both Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod had written to Mary, encouraging her to help Nivedita. Mrs Bull wrote to Mary about Nivedita: 'She has intuitions and courage worthy of Swami's daughter, and she will find a way. I am sure you will all love her as we do, and your personal sympathy and truth, and your sisters' will do so much for her.'<sup>9</sup> Swami Vivekananda also helped Nivedita by sending a letter ahead, introducing her to Mrs Milward Adams, whom he knew from Greenacre.

Nivedita and her companions arrived in Chicago on Wednesday, 8 November 1899 and Mr Adams met them at the station and took them to home and dinner with Mrs Adams. Things moved quickly. Mrs Adams arranged for Nivedita's speaking engagements. Nivedita wrote to Mrs Ole Bull: 'This morning my name will be brought before a board of missionaries—with the idea of my speaking there.'<sup>10</sup> And in the same letter, she wrote: 'Two ladies of strong missionary and educational interests are coming on Sunday to interview us' (*ibid.*).

That day Swamiji's 'sister' Mary Hale and her married sister were invited for lunch when Mary offered to take Nivedita to the Friday Club to join in a debate that was to follow a paper on Modern India but with the stipulation that Nivedita wear ordinary clothes since she considered it an affectation for her to wear modified nun's clothes, and she advised her not be identified with Swamiji, which suggestions, Nivedita declined. Mary could not understand Nivedita's Indian work. Mrs Bull wrote again to Mary, hoping to help Mary overlook her prejudices about Nivedita, saying: 'Margot is so loyal, untiring and true, she is worth perfecting and waiting for,

*Josephine MacLeod*



and she has enough material to bear the friction and polish.<sup>11</sup>

Untiring, Nivedita must have been. The following week, her two companions continued to stay at the Auditorium Hotel and returned soon to Boston and New York, while Nivedita shifted for a few days to Hull House, where her heavy schedule of lectures began. There, she gave a lecture on 'Religious Life in India'. After that, she gave a talk at the Women's Mending Guild one day, and a lecture on geography the next day, to children in an elementary school. Nivedita wrote: 'On Thursday afternoon I spoke to the Elementary School children, who were just lovely. So well educated! Their teacher has some idea of forming a children's guild for me. Tomorrow I am to go to lunch at the Pullman Rooms and meet Miss Harrison, the head of the Kindergarten World here.'<sup>12</sup>

Then, Mary Hale took Nivedita to join the discussion in the afternoon at the Friday Club and to give a talk to the Missionary Society the same evening. Nivedita wrote to Mrs Bull: 'Last Friday, talking to the Missionary Board, it seemed a terrible failure to me—like contriving to breathe under the weight of the Pyramids. But my chaperon—kind Mrs. Waterman—was entirely unconscious of this and happy in something that pleased her in my little speech—so it perhaps served some end' (1.243–4). Apparently, these were friends of Mrs Bull.

The next day, Nivedita wrote: 'I can't tell you where I am in the battle now. I am not out of heart, but the fight is slow—because the opportunities are so few. I go tomorrow—Thursday ... to spend a few days at Hull House. Then on Friday I hope to have a good practical talk at Miss Hale's' (1.247). On Saturday, Nivedita wrote: 'Yesterday afternoon, at the Hale's, there were about 25 people. Anywhere but in kind America my speech would have been spurned as

too grossly uninteresting for words. But there, everyone without exception promised to help as much as they could, to form a Guild, or to try and get me to other towns, or by giving a dollar a year—which was the amount I asked. And Mrs. Adams has a little plan ... [Mrs Adams was going to recommend her to the lecture bureau and they planned to form a Vedanta group in sympathy with her work]' (1.249). Nivedita wrote: 'Tomorrow—Sunday—I go to a new home to talk. I meet some new people at the Studio. ... Kind Miss Farmer sent me yesterday about 10 introductions' (ibid.). 'I gave my second lecture there ... and tried to put Real and Unreal and Renunciation in thinkable words' (1.253). She wrote to Mary Hale: 'I am down for another talk here on Friday night, which is to be paid for by a subscription to the work' (1.250).

From November 28, Nivedita stayed at Hull House, run by Jane Addams. Hull House was a settlement house for poor immigrant working women of various ethnic origins, designed to instil pride in their customs and culture, and yet assimilate them into American life. Upper-class women volunteered to teach classes in this extraordinary community and many of the students went on to study in colleges and universities.

Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod on 4 December 1899: 'Hull house has been dear' (1.253). Nivedita felt at home in the austere, natural atmosphere of the place. It was more to her liking: less of comfort and no glare of electric lights. Nivedita called Jane Addams of Hull House a karma yogi. She was a clear-headed quiet and unassuming person. Miss Jane Addams—to be distinguished from Nivedita's hostess in Chicago, Mrs Milward Adams—had written a book *Democracy and Social Ethics*, explaining her ideas. Her project was to develop a new consciousness to overcome the effects of social Darwinism, the competitive theory of evolution



which regarded all other races and classes than successful middle-class white people, that is, all aborigines, especially Native Americans, blacks, and Orientals as representing lower stages of evolutionary development.

Nivedita wrote that after her talk at 'Hull House Arts and Crafts Association, on the ancient arts of India, Kashmir shawl-making, Taj etc. etc.—was paid 15 dollars—and received orders for Hindu brass utensils and some embroideries!!!' (1.254). Nivedita spoke on Sunday morning at a church, and in the afternoon, at a private house. She spoke to a new group of people—Abhayananda's cast-off disciples and some Theosophists. Abhayananda, a sannyasini disciple of Swamiji who had defected, and her disciples, were fresh from her attacks on India and full of questions, but when they came to Kali-worship, Nivedita said she would give a whole evening to that subject. Again, she gave a talk one afternoon at Mrs Adams. She had planned for four more lectures the following week. Nivedita wrote to MacLeod:

A note from Mrs. Coonley Ward, [arrived] in reply to Miss Farmer's introduction, saying that she understood I wanted to meet club women, and I might come to lunch with her and [to] a meeting at the Women's Club ...

I have had various chances of this sort which have been dreary failures more or less, before—and so expecting nothing, but seeing the clear prompting of duty, I cancelled my arrangements with M. H. [Mary Hale] at once, and proceeded to the Club.

Mrs C. W. was distractingly busy—and I had a bewildering hour or two—till she handed me over to someone else, and left the club with an apology, while we waited to hear a paper on Colonisation.

It was a clever paper—of which the final proposition was that it was the duty of America to assume the responsibility of spreading the Anglo-Saxon type of Civilisation over the world. It was supported by short disquisitions from a professor of philosophy and a woman-politician on 'The Moral Responsibility Involved' and 'The Ethics of War'...

Then the meeting was open to discussion ... and I was the only person who rose at once!!! ...

I rose as an Englishwoman and poured out my burning heart over Humanity and Freedom and American ideals. Almost every second sentence was applauded. The Chairman rose in the middle to say the meeting dispensed with the time-limit in my case—and when I at length went to my seat, I heard 'Fine! Fine!' as I passed along. ...

I ran in to tell Mrs. Adams, and she was so pleased. She said I had struck the heart of Chicago in the Women's Club. It had been her ambition for me.

And so you see I have had my assurance that the Cause is to triumph. ...

The professor of philosophy is to delay his departure. From Chicago to come and talk it out tomorrow afternoon. Friday—I am to talk my work at Mrs. Adams! (1.256–7).

*Miss Jane Addams, 22 July 1915*



On the following Sunday, Nivedita was to go to luncheon and discussion at the Every Day Club and speak at a Church in the evening. On 6th December she wrote to Mrs Bull: 'Kali has worked an unforeseen miracle—today. It was all through one of Miss Farmer's introductions ... If success comes I suppose you would like me to 'enter every open door' as dear Miss Farmer says' (1.258–9). Nivedita, throughout her struggles, depended upon the blessings of her guru and the Divine Mother. Sri Sarada Devi wrote to Nivedita on 13 May 1900: 'The Banyan of Dakshin-eswar sings of Kali to be sure, and blessed is he who has ears to hear it' (1.412). A few days later, on 10 December 1899, Nivedita wrote:

Last night M. H. [Mary Hale] and I dined with Isabel McKindley, to meet Miss Josephine Locke. ... She was like 20 storms in one teacup. She talked vividly and exhaustively about

Woman—Woman—Woman—the spiritual forces of the present day ... and a host of other things. She struck me as eccentric—fine—and *absurd*. ... Then she suddenly took paper and pencil, and drew up a list of people I must know, appointing ways for me to find them ... Then I went to her office at 10:30 today ... and have been dragged to two lectures—spoken at one—made 1/2 a dozen engagements, and been introduced to something like 50 people ... Do you wonder that one wants rest and inspiration? ...

M. H. [Mary Hale] and I spent the night at Miss M's [McKindley's]. We slept in one room and I lay in her bed till nearly 3 arguing—and talking. She is dear, so loving—but her attitude to Swami, or rather her conception of him is still a mystery to me. ...

She says my 'hero-worship' irritates her—I didn't mean to show it, Yum!—but somehow it comes out without my knowing ... (1.260).

Hull House Women's Club Building, Chicago, 1905



Nivedita wrote to Mary Hale at Christmas time:

If I am set on seeing Swami in ways that seem to you silly—let him tell me so—I can bear it that way. After all—it is between him & me. Now dear Aunt Mary—one other point—you amazed me beyond words by your 'I know Swami quite as well as you do.' Why I never dreamt of such a point—you know him far far better. What is more—there is no comparison between your place in his heart & mine. ... there is only one place that I can claim in Swami's eyes, & that is a working-place & in what pertains to my work he has trained me with infinite care ... For the rest—Swami is the whole personal interest in my life—in this relation of Father. ... you are his sisters—I am only a disciple. The whole relationship between you is of equality—mine is inferiority (1.278–9).

Nivedita was in for another one of her 'dreary failures' when she had approached Mary Hale to be the Secretary of the Chicago Guild for Help—for her school, and Mary not only refused, but clearly did not want to identify herself with Nivedita's work. Nivedita confided in Miss MacLeod on 9 January 1900:

It seems to me that I have just received the last and worst blow of all. One of Swami's earliest friends has been in to say that she and her family would rather not be identified with my work. They wanted to help but find themselves out of sympathy. ... Do give me a little comfort, for I feel utterly discouraged. If this is the attitude of Swami's people, how can I ever expect to do anything anywhere? (1.296).

The Hale family in particular had been the first family to take Swamiji into their home as one of their own family. Mrs Hale's daughter, Mary was the recipient of his many affectionate letters. It came as a shock to Nivedita that Mary was not in sympathy with her work. Nivedita felt discouraged. She had even written to

Miss MacLeod, her moral supporter, that she had been willing to share her private diary with 'the Hale girls, but not another soul ever'.<sup>13</sup> So Nivedita was surprised at the attitude of those whom she considered to be in the intimate circle of the Swami's friends.

Miss MacLeod advised her to stand on her own feet. She wrote to Nivedita on 14 January 1900:

I have your long letter telling me that Mary Hale does not wish to act as your Secretary and of the general disapproval. If I had you here half an hour you would start again with greater courage and hope than you ever had before. I quite see the blow you have had. It was dreadful—but now that it is over it will influence your whole life and make you a success—independent of Swami. You will have Kali's blessings direct and Swami's perfect love and trust. ...

*Mary Hale*





You know and Swami knows that I have always felt you had a mission—your own message for this work—and you can do better work where he is not known. No one who has ever known and loved him can ever take anybody else's version of him—not even yours. As Saradananda used to say, they would not listen to Swami in the Ramakrishna days. So you must strike out alone with new people—make your own audiences—your own disciples in your own way, and two years of training in America is not too much. The women problem is left to you and Swami should be left out—obliterated in your outward work.<sup>14</sup>

Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod on 9th January 1900:

It is so like climbing in gravel! Most people make me sit down for hours and tell them all about everything, and then they say they are so much interested and I have given them great pleasure but they never offer to give me anything back, not even one dollar. ...

I know I must go on patiently until I meet the right people, whom I shall find here and there. If there are none, my poor babies cannot be educated, that is all!

Tomorrow I start off on a little lecture-tour, and shall be kept going for the rest of the month. The first fortnight in February is unfilled, and I must see schools in that time.<sup>15</sup>

The next day, in Jackson, Michigan, Nivedita met Mr O'Donnell who was the Superintendent of all the Michigan Sunday schools, and a friend of Mrs Adams. After giving a talk at his home, as members of her audience rushed up to her enthusiastically, Nivedita said: 'I give you great pleasure, did I? Well, but are you going to give us anything?' (1.297) Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod: 'It was horrid of me I suppose—and It has been more and more my temper lately' (ibid.). One lady asked 'What can we do to help you?' (ibid.). Nivedita asked for a mere dollar a year for

ten years. One person said: 'Oh I'm so thankful, I never wanted to give anyone a dollar in my life so much as I do you, this afternoon.' 'Yes, said the first woman. I knew you must want something we could do, for I've never noticed that great things could be done without money' (ibid.). Nivedita never lost hope. She wrote: 'And so they say they will form a group for me, and if Mother is really in it, I suppose they will. ... Someone called me down to receive a visitor with 5 dollars. "That won't go very far towards 15 or 20 thousand!"—she said' (1.297–8). Nivedita gathered pathetically little, a few dollars, bit by bit. She then went on to try her luck in Detroit. From there she wrote to MacLeod on 16 January 1900:

Life brings experience. ... I suddenly found myself yesterday afternoon in a nest of thorns, and learnt the psychological process that makes Swami fight and attack! I nearly let go and did it myself—yesterday. ... The Women's Club, Detroit, after 26 years of civil war ... woke up yesterday afternoon to find me addressing it on India. ...

One lady tried to drag me into attacking missionaries. I peremptorily refused. Another 'sniffed' and said, I had said nothing that she had not heard the missionaries say before. ... Then the President broke through hospitality to cross question me about polygamy ...

Then one woman insisted that I should remonstrate with husbands and wives in India for not eating together and put 'a higher way' before them. ... After a few more remarks of this sort, the customary question about giving babies to crocodiles sounded thoroughly good-natured ... one insisted on caste being, sympathetically explained ...

I never was in a gathering so like a lunatic-asylum. Caste did not interest them at all ... 'monogamy!' ... 'Child widows!' ... everywhere would spring up a violent affirmation about the inferiority of wives, the preference of sons, the contempt for Woman—Woman—Woman.



Oh how I recognised the steps that Swami had trodden before me! ...

I could not have imagined feeling so thoroughly angry with an audience. ... I am to speak at the 20th Cent. Club on Thursday and at a private home Friday; [and] Go to Chicago Saturday (1.300-2).

However there was a change in mood in Nivedita's next letter to MacLeod; still in Detroit, she wrote to Miss MacLeod on 18 January 1900 about what she had learned from all this lecturing so far. It was just as Miss MacLeod had predicted: 'two years training in America would not be too much. ... On this journey I have seemed to find my feet, and to be led every step by Mother Herself. ... Shall a child not rejoice in speaking its father's message?' (1.303). In Detroit Nivedita got moral support if not funds, from Christina Greenstidel, Mary Funki, and Mrs Bagley, all devotees of Vivekananda. They each gave ten dollars. Nivedita remarked: 'And very rich people have not cared to give more than \$5!' (1.304).

Then Nivedita went back to Chicago, but by no means was Nivedita's suffering over. She later wrote: 'Have just come in from another useless effort.' (1.306). Three days later on 26 January 1900 she wrote to MacLeod: 'I lunched with the Hales yesterday, and found myself just as glad to see Mary as though there had been no blow. ... she had not yet collected one dollar of all that were promised months ago! ... Somehow, this journey seems to have given me so much experience! I understand better about collecting money, and founding groups (1.307).



Mrs. Bagley

Nivedita then travelled to Kansas City and spoke at Indianapolis on Religious Life and Social Institutions in India, arranged by Mrs Sewall [May Wright Sewall], where she earned fifty dollars. This was more than she had been able to scrape together so far. At Mrs Sewall's Nivedita met a public school Principal who encouraged her after hearing her stories of history and geography, told in a school. Nivedita stopped briefly in Cleveland. In the meantime, Mrs Ole Bull was encouraging her to go to Boston and New York. Nivedita stayed at first with a friend of Mrs Bull's, Mrs Edna Cheney, who took her to a Women's Suffrage Convention. Nivedita wrote: 'They quoted last night some great leaders' saying that a new truth before it is accepted must meet with (1) ridicule (2) argument and (3) opposition. When these 3 are present, know that you are about to win. Oh dear—come on all 3—as hard as you can—I don't mind how *much*, if only you are not everlasting' (1.350).

Apparently, on May 31st, Nivedita shifted from Mrs Cheney's to the home of Mrs Ole Bull where she had ample opportunity to experience the three. Bipin Chandra Pal had also arrived as a guest at Mrs Bull's that night and when he went down to dinner he met Nivedita for the first time. He wrote in his memoirs that 'At very first sight of each other we would start to fight.'<sup>16</sup> During the National Movement, Nivedita had contributed a series of articles to Pal's *New India* magazine, which she later published as *The Web of Indian Life*, and though they were friends, they constantly picked arguments when

they met. That night it was over Brahmo women and Christian missionaries.

The next day the fight was over different points of view of the caste system in front of Mrs Bull's other guests, which was an embarrassment to Mrs Bull. It seems she had invited about a hundred school teachers to tea. Nivedita reconsidered her tactics and wrote out a plan for her first talk in Boston on 1st June 1900. It was arranged by Mrs Cheney, Mrs Ole Bull, and Dr Lewis Janes, who were members of the board of directors of the Free Religious Association. Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod: 'The day after tomorrow—Free Relig. Ass. [Free Religious Association]—I have not yet defined my speech to myself. I half thought of talking it over with you.'<sup>17</sup> Nivedita proceeded to write an outline of her talk and elaborate some of the points in her letter which she completed the next day, saying: 'Mr. Pal precedes me, on "India's Contribution to Free Religion." Oh Yum! My hand just trembles with nervousness!' (1.355).

Nivedita was apprehensive at the thought of facing her antagonist in front of an audience of intellectuals, all well-known speakers themselves. Nivedita had a more passionate love for India than many Indians. Pratap Chandra Majumdar was to speak about Ram Mohan Roy at the same meeting. Nivedita had one great advantage over the other speakers, as a person coming from another culture she had a viewpoint far more vast and universal and far deeper and more insightful. She also knew the Christian standpoint of her general audience. She was well aware that the audience believed the civilisation of the West superior to the East. She invited questions after her speech: 'I should be glad to accept any challenge on the subject that might be offered me by Western people.'<sup>18</sup> Nivedita spoke of the detachment of civilisation from religion in the West as men and women live for something that is

not included in Christianity. Nivedita pointed out the rift between science and religion and between truth and mythology that had occurred in Christianity in the West and declared that there was no such distinction in India. 'How different it is in India,' she said, 'where it is expected that every man on his own account practices within the silence of his own soul that religious idea which appeals to him most' (ibid.). She pointed out that if a religion were not universal and inclusive, it would be militant against those who do not find salvation by its path. In this lecture, Nivedita touched her favourite point, and a practical one for the failing economies of the West today, when she said:

We of the West are yet to be beholden to the people of the East for the most passionate impulse of simplicity and renunciation in common life that the world has ever seen. I think that the hope of this country and the hope of England and of all the luxurious and money-loving West, *lies not in driving poverty out, but in the love of poverty*—in espousing it as the old saints and people espoused it, and this, if it is to come to us at all, will come through the genius of the people of the Orient (366–7).

Nivedita prophesied that in one to three hundred years afterward people will realise the influence of Sanskrit (by which she meant Sanskrit culture or India) by the rest of the world. She also saw the day in the future when 'the Christian would be found in China or Japan, as here and the Hindu will be found here, as often as there; the Buddhist and the Moslem will be found the world over' (367). After this lecture, Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod on 6 June 1900: 'My speech last Friday was more successful than it deserved to be ... R. W. Trine paid me a compliment. As soon as I began to speak ... he classed me [as one of] ... the "highest type of women."<sup>19</sup>

Mrs Ole Bull arranged for Nivedita to give a talk in Steinert Hall in Copley Square in the centre of town. Nivedita spoke of her educational work in India. She said in the course of her talk:

I think that we must gladly admit that the exchange of ideals between the nations of the eastern and western hemispheres cannot be wholly one-sided. While the western woman of today spiritually descended, as I believe, from the Roman-type of ideal womanhood, holds a near attainment to the ideal in energy, civic and political activity. The woman of the East is fully equal to her in other respects and is inevitably bound to teach her and lead her to a higher attainment of perfect womanhood.

There is no ideal for the woman of the east outside of virtue, the spiritual ideal that we approach only by interior roads of thought and feeling. Hers are ideals of achievement in virtue and of service, of heroic deed and sacrifice, of passionate devotion to the ideal of purity which eastern society places before her.<sup>20</sup>

In this Steinert Hall lecture, Nivedita spoke of the sacredness of marriage and motherhood in Indian society. In a newspaper report the next day, it was mentioned that her association with Hindu life had given her a unique insight into the Indian character and a good understanding of their myths and customs. Sri Sarada Devi had written to her in a letter dated 13 May 1900: 'You are indeed doing good work—but don't forget your Bengali! Or I shall not

be able to understand you, when you come back. It gave me such delight to know that you are speaking of Dhruva, Savitri, Sita-Ram and so on there! The accounts of their holy lives are better than all the vain talk of the world, I am sure.'<sup>21</sup>

Nivedita in these last two lectures had given her most successful lectures. The training—Swamiji predicted—she would get in the West bore fruit at the end. However, the fund-raising for the school had not been successful; only a trickle of money came after so many struggles. A man from the 20th Century Club gave Nivedita twenty dollars and Mrs Cheney gave another twenty-five (1,359). Swamiji assured her through many letters, consoling her about not being able to raise money for her school. He at last wrote: 'If it does not come, who cares?' Nivedita returned to New York in early June 'after a long, gruelling, and largely fruitless work in the United States.'<sup>22</sup>

At last, at the end of June, it was Swamiji who interested Mrs Collis Potter Huntington, the wife of a multi-millionaire railroad and mining tycoon, in Nivedita's work. He wrote to Nivedita, advising her to meet Mrs Huntington, 'one of the richest people in the U.S.', and not to mind about her reception in Chicago. Nivedita wrote to Miss MacLeod on 26 June: 'Yesterday Mrs. C. P. Huntington gave me \$500 [5000?]' (1,367). Mrs Leggett gave a thousand. Nivedita received a letter from Swami Saradananda dated 11 April 1900: 'We are so glad to hear of your




*Mrs. C. P. Arabella Huntington*

successful work at Cambridge and elsewhere. I am sorry to hear you are rather overworked. Please take care of yourself a little. We want you here so much' (2.1284).

Nivedita wrote triumphantly to Miss MacLeod on 26 June 1900: 'Swami says that the interest on the present sum of \$6500 will give me in Calcutta a monthly income of at least 50 Rs. and that that, with what I may gain in the next few months will be enough to begin upon. So he wants me to leave for Calcutta next January or Feb.!!! Isn't that joyful? ... "Live from Mother's hand" is all he will say. So I think an early date will see me back in the beloved land' (1.367-8).

At the start of Nivedita's lecture tour, Swamiji had asked Nivedita: 'Do you think, Margot, that you can collect the money you want in the West? ... There were two things I wanted to see before my death—One is done [the Belur Math], and this [the Women's Math] is the rest.'<sup>23</sup> Nivedita's co-worker, Christina, wrote: 'If Swami Vivekananda's ideas regarding the education of women are carried out in the true spirit, a being will be evolved who will be unique in the history of the world. As the woman of ancient Greece was almost perfect physically, this one will be her complement intellectually and spiritually—a woman gracious, loving, tender, long-suffering, great in heart and intellect, but greatest of all in spirituality.'<sup>24</sup> With this ideal and her faith in the blessings of her guru and Sri Sarada Devi, Nivedita's mission in the West was successful and she was able to reopen her school in India. Beyond that, Nivedita was able to interpret the highest ideals of Indian culture and society to the West in practical terms and to formulate her own prophesy of the influence of Indian ideals in the world for the future. Today, a hundred and fifty years later her prophesies are coming true. After leaving America, on her way back to India, she wrote in

a letter to Josephine MacLeod on 7 March 1901: 'Blessed India! How infinitely much I owe her. Have I anything worth having that I do not directly or indirectly owe to Her?'<sup>25</sup> 

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## ***Breakfast with the Sisters: A Meeting of Great Minds***

**Pravrajika Shuddhatmaprana**

**B**REAKFAST IS THE GREAT MEAL HERE,' wrote Nivedita to Josephine MacLeod on 26 November 1902. 'At that hour we keep more or less open house. I am really extravagant in brown bread and Quaker oats, and a disciple has given us good coffee. ... This morning Mr. Ratcliffe [the editor of *The Statesman*] bicycled over and sat on the floor with the rest of us. Doesn't it sound nice?'<sup>1</sup> S K Ratcliffe, in fact, 'cycled down with his wife from their own house every Sunday morning for breakfast.' He later

wrote 'that breakfast was served very simply on the little verandah, and those who talked there could never tear themselves away until the sun had become too hot for a comfortable journey back through [t]he blazing streets.'<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the list of writers, journalists, artists, scientists, politicians, and others who came to 'The House of the Sisters', whether for breakfast or not, is staggering. As Barbara Foxe wrote: 'In the cool of the early morning, before the work of the day began, men, women and children—and, later, statesmen, writers, and thinkers of many nationalities, though most frequently Indian—called, and talked, and discussed' (164). But the

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Sunday breakfasts were the special time for the meeting of minds, as Mr Ratcliffe indicated, most likely because the Sisters—Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine—were more free then, as their school was closed on Sundays.

Not much is known about Sister Christine's role in these discussions, as less is known about her life, and she had a more quiet personality. But she was definitely involved, and we shall discuss more about her later. On the other hand, Sister Nivedita was the dominant personality here, and readily became deeply involved in many aspects of Indian life and culture, in some part kindled by the stimulating discussions at their breakfasts. It was, in fact, at The House of the Sisters where many political, social, and cultural plans were made, and also ideas exchanged and developed, that had profound influence on modern India. Here we shall look at just a few of the guests at

*Samuel Kerkham Ratcliffe (1868–1958)*



The House of the Sisters, and see their interaction with Sister Nivedita and the parts they played in India's fight for political and cultural freedom.

We have already mentioned S K Ratcliffe, the young British editor of *The Statesman*. Soon after he became acquainted with Nivedita, he was married in Calcutta, and both he and his wife, Katie, began to come for Sunday breakfasts. Nivedita obviously loved them very much, as we can see from the tone of the many letters written to them after they returned to England. Being the editor of an important newspaper was a great responsibility, and, it seems, Mr Ratcliffe used his position to help India in its struggle for freedom. In a letter, referring to him, Nivedita wrote: 'And HE has been divine about India. He has done yeoman service to our cause, as Editor of the *Statesman*.'<sup>3</sup> Among other things, Mr Ratcliffe published items in the paper written by Nivedita, exhorting Indians to stand up against falsehood and injustice. After he resigned his editorship of *The Statesman* over a disagreement, Nivedita tried her best to get him an editorship with another paper, but failed.

Yet Ratcliffe and his wife both continued working for the cause of India even after they returned to England. And later Nivedita understood that if they had stayed in India, Ratcliffe may have even been imprisoned for the way he spoke up and exposed the corruption in the British rule of India. In a letter to the Ratcliffes dated 28 July 1911, only a few months before she died, Nivedita wrote in a sad and reflective mood: 'The Man of Science [J C Bose] says it would be a wonderful thing for *us*, but a bad thing for *you*, if we raised Indian money to buy the I.D.N. [*Indian Daily News*] and gave it to you. It would be so bad for you, that I don't think about it. You are now leading a wholesome life [back in England]. And yet how happy those years have been, in which we had you here [in Calcutta]! Our little world seems

silent and deserted now! One sees life as something that lay in those years and is past' (2.1215).

Mr H W Nevinson was another friend and journalist in India who championed the cause of India. And he also, after returning to England, continued to fight for India. In a letter to Josephine MacLeod written Christmas Eve, 1907, Nivedita wrote from England, 'Nevinson is writing splendid articles—and publicly complains of the tempering [tampering?] with his letters in the post' (2.885). Regarding a book Nevinson had written, Nivedita wrote to the Ratcliffes on 4 November 1908: 'Mrs. Bull is going to work to make Nevinson's book known as much as possible. We shall of course buy it at once' (2.925).

Another guest at The House of the Sisters was Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. Nivedita first met him in Baroda in October 1902, when she was on a lecture tour. Aurobindo had recently returned to India from England, and had already read Nivedita's book *Kali, the Mother*. He was very impressed with it, and was glad to have an opportunity to meet her. At this time Aurobindo was determined to set out a course for attaining India's freedom through any means possible, including armed insurrection, if necessary. Nivedita approved of his plans and encouraged him to come to Bengal, which he did a few years later.

Though Aurobindo himself mentioned later that he did not consult with Nivedita about 'the conduct of the revolutionary movement' that he started,<sup>4</sup> it is known that Nivedita was one of the members of a five-member central council that he set up to unite the revolutionaries under a single organisation (182).

After he was released from the Alipore jail in 1909, Aurobindo started two weekly journals in Calcutta—*Karma Yogin*, in English, and *Dharma*, in Bengali. According to Pravrajika Atmaprana: 'The weeklies were not purely political for they included articles on Ramakrishna,

Vivekananda, Yoga, the Hindu Dharma, etc. During this time, Sri Aurobindo met Nivedita often as he has said: "Later on I began to make time to go and see her occasionally at Bagh-bazar"' (224).

In a letter to the Ratcliffes dated 20 January 1910, Nivedita wrote: 'How I wish you could get the *Karmayogin* every week! In my opinion, it is a triumph of style and thought. Aravindo is magnificent. On the other hand, of course, every man who directs a party runs the risk of watering-down the ideal.'<sup>5</sup>

In February 1910 Aurobindo learned that he was about to be arrested again, and immediately left for Chandannagore, a French territory north of Calcutta. He then sent a message to Nivedita to continue editing *Karma Yogin*. It is also known that she went to Chandannagore twice that month to consult with him. Nivedita edited the journal until April 1910, when the Government shut it down.

On 7 April 1910, Nivedita wrote to the Ratcliffes:

Meanwhile, this week the K.Y. [Karma Yogin] has been attacked. There was a Bengali weekly printed at the same office—*Dharma*. This was stopped unless deposit of Rs. 2000 made. Not made—and A. Gh. [Aurobindo Ghosh] and the printer of K.Y. [Karma Yogin] were to be arrested, on article which I enclose. I trust you can give the article publicity in England. Is it seditious? A. Gh. [Aurobindo Ghosh] has not been found. ... Meanwhile there should be 2 more issues of K.Y. in any case (2.1086–7).



Henry W Nevinson (1856–1941)

And on 6 July 1910, she wrote again, 'Aruvindo seems to be still uncaught, though 5000/- Rupees, are now offered [presumably for his arrest]' (2.1107).

From Chandannagore, Aurobindo left for Pondicherry, also a French territory, and remained there the rest of his life, highly revered as an illumined spiritual teacher.

A more moderate political leader, who was also a friend of Nivedita and Christine, was G K Gokhale, from Maharashtra. He was a sincere man who was more inclined to try to compromise and make the best of a bad situation with the British, rather than incite a revolution. Though Nivedita frequently told him she did not agree with him, he was nevertheless often found at The House of the Sisters whenever he was in Calcutta. What is surprising is the conciliatory

*Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866–1915)*



tone that Nivedita had with him in her letters. Though she normally manifested a caustic tongue for those she disagreed with, she was generally very respectful towards him, and would also apologise for any wounded feelings she may have caused (2.781).

Another of the moderate leaders was Romesh Chandra Dutt, an economist whose book on Indian economy Nivedita often referred to and recommended to others. She eventually became quite close to him and sometimes referred to him as her Godfather—a relationship that he reciprocated. He greatly encouraged her during her writing of *The Web of Indian Life*.

In 1905 Gokhale was elected President of the Congress Party at its meeting in Varanasi, and at his invitation Nivedita attended the meetings. She did not speak during the proceedings, but she did participate in the vote of thanks given to Gokhale afterwards. However, the house she rented during that time—located in the Tilbhandeshvar section of Varanasi—became a meeting place, as in Calcutta, of moderates and extremists alike. Though Gokhale, a moderate, was elected President, the extremists' resolution to accept the Swadeshi movement, and boycott British goods, was accepted unanimously by the Congress Party that year.

But at the 1906 session of the Party, the moderates—led by Gokhale and Romesh Chandra Dutt—and the extremists—led by Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, known together as 'Lal-Bal-Pal', as well as Aurobindo—split the Congress into two parties.<sup>6</sup> Though Nivedita favoured the extremists' position, she was greatly upset by this split, as she felt that only a united front would work against the British rule. But there was nothing she could do about it. Later, when Gokhale had fallen out of favour even with the moderates, she still defended him, as she knew his sincerity.<sup>7</sup>

Part of Nivedita's work for India's freedom



was to instil a sense of national unity—nationalism, as she called it—in the country. Thus, she did everything she could to support the Swadeshi movement—the movement to encourage Indians to buy only Indian-made goods. She even helped young men go to the US to learn about Western business and industry so their products could be more competitive. On 21 November 1906, Nivedita wrote to Josephine MacLeod, expressing her gratitude to Mr Whitmarsh for helping a young man tour some factories in the US for this purpose (2.830).

Later, when the British Government tried to crush the Swadeshi movement, another of Nivedita's friends, S N Banerjee, pulled off an outstanding act of defiance—to prove that the movement was not dead—by setting up a Swadeshi Bazaar. As Nivedita proudly wrote to the Ratcliffes on 16 August 1911: 'Yesterday I took the girls [the students of her school] to the Swadeshi mela. S.N. Banerjee has got up this Swadeshi Bazaar—or exhibition—as a demonstration, in place of the processions and speeches of Aug. 7th' (2.1220).

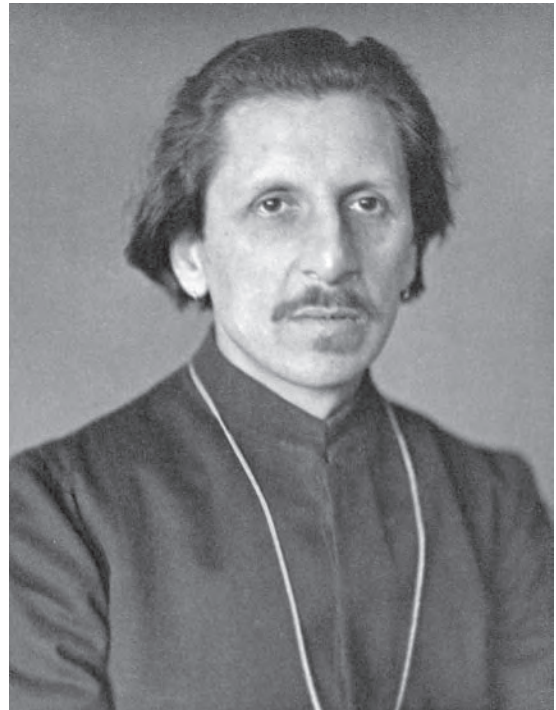
Another aspect of her interest in Indian nationalism was in the field of Indian art. Here she had wonderful allies in E B Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, as also Abanindranath Tagore and his students, such as Nandalal Bose and Asit Haldar. E B Havell had been superintendent of the Madras School of Art and also Keeper of the Government Art Gallery in Calcutta from 1896 to 1906, but Nivedita met him later when she was in England. Ananda Coomaraswamy, however, was now and then a visitor at The House of the Sisters, including at least once for breakfast (2.1140). According to Barbara Foxe, 'Havell, Nivedita and Coomaraswamy attacked, in print, constantly and often under much criticism, the theory which Vivekananda also had attacked; the view that Indian art was derivative, having its roots in Greek art.'<sup>8</sup>

In a letter dated 7 April 10 to Mr Havell, Nivedita wrote: 'We were all delighted with your splendid fight—especially when the manifesto sent to the "Times" finally arrived. You are doing wonders for Indian Art—and I now see how even your resignation of the work here [in India], can be made to serve the great cause.'<sup>9</sup>

Regarding Tagore: 'Abanindranath Tagore, the vice-principal of the Calcutta Art School, was still enthusiastic about European ideas, until he met Nivedita. But she changed his views, and before long he introduced a new school of art, known as the Calcutta school.'<sup>10</sup> Some of Tagore's students, such as Nandalal Bose and Asit Haldar, were very devoted to Nivedita. Once, without even informing or asking them beforehand, she bought train tickets and sent both of these young men to Ajanta to study and copy the paintings there. And they did not mind.

According to a letter of Nivedita to the Ratcliffes, dated 23 February 1910, the young men's

*Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947)*





Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951)

visit to Ajanta drew suspicion from the police, as any unusual movements by Indian young men did in those days. As she wrote: 'Nanda Lal Bose and another artist, returning with her [Mrs Heringham] from Ajanta have been forcibly detained, and only allowed to proceed home on telegrams from Woodroffe and Blount. No reasons given—but easy enough to imagine!'<sup>11</sup> The irony is that Sir John Woodroffe was one of those who vehemently opposed the ideas of Nivedita, Coomaraswamy, and Nandalal's teacher, Tagore.

Nandalal once drew a picture of himself and Suren Ganguly sitting with Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine at the 'Sister's house at Bosepara—1908 or 1909'.<sup>12</sup> Years later he said about Nivedita, 'When she died, it was like being deprived of the presence of a guiding angel.'<sup>13</sup>

Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore, and Asit Haldar were among the artists who did the illustrations for *Myths and Legends of the Hindus and Buddhists*, by Sister Nivedita and Ananda K Coomaraswamy. These exquisite drawings

were included in the first edition of the book, published in London in 1913, after Nivedita's death. As Nivedita did not finish the book, it was edited and completed after her death by Coomaraswamy. The present edition of the book, published by Advaita Ashrama, also includes these drawings.

Though Nivedita was a prolific writer herself, she probably spent more time working with other writers on their works. First and foremost of these was Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose, the famous botanist. It is well known that Nivedita did much to bring J C Bose to prominence in the field of science. She not only helped him write several books—*Living and Non-Living*, *Plant Response*, *Comparative Electro-Physiology*, and *Irritability of Plants*—but also wrote about him in newspapers and journals at a time when British scientists were dismissing his work, or sometimes even obstructing and thwarting it. Thus Bose was a daily visitor to The House of the Sisters.

Sister Devamata, an American disciple of Swami Paramananda, once lived for some time at The House of the Sisters with Sister Nivedita and Sister Christine. She described Nivedita's collaboration with Dr Bose thus: 'Literary work absorbed Sister Nivedita too profoundly to enable her to take part to any extent in teaching. She was occupied also in assisting the famous botanist, Dr. J. C. Bose, in preparing a new book on plant life. He spent several hours every day at the school and sometimes lunched there, so I had a delightful opportunity to know him.'<sup>14</sup>

And in a letter to Josephine MacLeod dated 22 November 1905, Nivedita herself gave a glimpse of the work on one of Bose's books:

We are gradually finishing the gigantic labour of the Bairn's [J C Bose's] book on Botany. We are now working over the conclusion and will hope by his birthday on the 30th to have put in the inevitable extra discoveries, and even the

Introduction. This does not mean the end of the *work* but it does probably mean no more serious composition—and I am hoping at the end to take a month or two of rest and travel. We work now 3 and sometimes 4 days a week from 8 A. M. till 5/30 P. M. with an hour or two omitted for meals. And in the holidays we do almost more than this, every day. You can imagine how exhausted we both are—for this has been going on continuously since the beginning of October, 1904. But then, on the other hand, one's love and pride are more than satisfied for 20 years hence, when they have had time to understand it all, they will say that the Science of Botany was revolutionised by a Hindu!<sup>15</sup>

Bose's wife, Abala, and also his sister, Labanyaprabha, took great interest in Nivedita's and Christine's school, and even taught there for some time. In fact, we might even say that both Nivedita and Christine were basically members of the Boses' family. Though Christine was usually Mrs Sevier's guest at the Mayavati Advaita Ashrama during school breaks, Nivedita often travelled with the Boses—sometimes to Darjeeling, once on a pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath, and at least twice to Europe and the U.S. Moreover, she was with the Boses in Darjeeling in 1911 when she passed away.

Bose was devastated by Nivedita's death, but for the rest of his life he acknowledged his gratitude to her in many ways. Nivedita had worked extremely hard to have Bose's own Research Institute built. It was to be a laboratory where he did not have to work under the direction of anyone else. Unfortunately she did not live to see it built, nor did she live to see him knighted by the British Government. But when the Bose Institute was completed, part of her ashes was placed there in a memorial fountain to her. Bose also left in his will one lakh rupees for another memorial to be built in her name. With this money Abala Bose had the Nivedita Hall built in a women's welfare institution.

Another writer whose work Nivedita took up was Dinesh Chandra Sen. When he was writing *A History of the Bengali Language and Literature*, he asked her to edit it. According to Barbara Foxe: 'It took them a year, often working all day. He, too, was mothered and encouraged by Nivedita, who scolded him for his timidity, and his lack of interest in politics, as frankly as she praised his hard work.'<sup>16</sup>

Nivedita was a hard taskmaster and sometimes demanded that he revise parts of the book she did not like or agree with. The arguments at The House of the Sisters went on, but Dinesh took it all with good grace. Yet, on Nivedita's side, in a letter to the Ratcliffes, she called the book 'really magnificent' and 'a perfectly splendid book'.<sup>17</sup> And in another letter to the Ratcliffes, she rejoiced in the new ideas on India—and Bengal in particular—that she had received from the book (2.1073). When it was finally finished, Nivedita refused to allow Sen to give her any credit or to mention her in it. Dinesh later wrote, 'I have only read in the Gita about selfless work, but have hardly come across anyone with detachment like hers.'<sup>18</sup>

Nivedita first met Rabindranath Tagore in 1898, soon after she came to India. Hearing that she was there to work for the education of Indian women, Tagore wanted her to give his daughter a proper British education. When Nivedita refused—as she felt the girl should be educated according to Indian ideals—Rabindranath was impressed. He then offered to let her use part of his house for a school, but she again refused. According to Pravrajika Atmaprana, 'It is said that it was Nivedita's deep respect and love for the Hindu religion and apathy towards the English that inspired him to depict the character of Gora in his novel of the same name.'<sup>19</sup>

In October 1904 Nivedita and Christine went with a party of twenty people on a pilgrimage to



Bodh Gaya. Rabindranath Tagore and his son were part of this group, as were the Boses. In a letter to Josephine MacLeod, dated 15 October 1904, Nivedita gave a description of Rabindranath during this pilgrimage:

The Poet, Mr. Tagore, was a *perfect* guest. He is almost the only Indian man I have ever seen who has nothing of the spoiled child socially about him. He has a *naïf* sort of vanity in speech which is so childlike as to be rather touching. But he thinks of others all the time—as no one but a Western hostess could. He sang and chatted day and night—was always ready—either to entertain or be entertained—served Dr. Bose as if he were his mother—struggles all the time between work for the country and the national longing to seek mukti.<sup>20</sup>

Tagore was also a frequent visitor to The House of the Sisters. Though Nivedita translated one of his short stories 'Cabuliwala' into English, it seems there could be no further collaboration between them as far as writing goes. As Tagore once wrote: 'I had felt her great power, but with all that I understood that her path was not for me. She was a versatile genius, and there was another thing in her nature: that was her militancy. She had power and she exerted that power with full force on the lives of others. When it was not possible to agree with her, it was impossible to work with her.'<sup>21</sup>

It is probable that some of the disagreement between them centred on political issues. Nivedita considered anyone who was not taking an active part in opposing the British—such as Dinesh Chandra Sen—to be 'timid'. Tagore was definitely not the militant type. Yet he had his own style that Nivedita perhaps did not recognise.<sup>22</sup>

However, this disagreement seems not to have affected their friendship. Rabindranath wrote a beautiful Introduction to her book, *The Web of Indian Life*, praising her view of India. As

he wrote: 'And because she had a comprehensive mind and extraordinary insight of love she could see the creative ideals at work behind our social forms and discover our soul that has living connection with its past and is marching towards its fulfilment.'<sup>23</sup> And in the memorial service held for Nivedita after her death, Rabindranath said: 'She is to be respected not because she was a Hindu but because she was great. She is to be honoured not because she was like us, but because she was greater than us.'<sup>24</sup> Nivedita, in her turn, would have been the happiest and proudest person in India if she could have known that, just two years after her passing away, Tagore would be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

Another writer who was seen at The House of the Sisters was Mahendranath Gupta, the recorder of *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. In a letter dated 23 September 1909, Nivedita wrote: 'M. is letting me help him to correct his Gospel. He comes on Saturday mornings and is unexpectedly docile.'<sup>25</sup> For a short time M. was publishing the *Gospel* in English. This is perhaps what Nivedita was referring to here. But later M. was forced by public demand to concentrate on the Bengali edition. So their collaboration most likely did not last long.

As we said earlier, Nivedita was the dominant personality here, and most likely many of the discussions at The House of the Sisters centred around her. But there was another member of the household—the other Sister, Sister Christine—who also took part. Though Christine did not take such an active part in the freedom struggle as Nivedita did, the movement definitely had her support. Her reluctance to get heavily involved was probably partly due to her monastic association with the Ramakrishna Order.

Shortly after Swami Vivekananda's mahasamadhi, Nivedita was forced to make a decision about her priorities. As she was already by then getting heavily involved in the fledgling freedom



movement, Swami Brahmananda asked her to either withdraw from it, or else resign from the Order. As a brahmacharini of the Ramakrishna Order, she was not allowed to take part in politics. Nivedita understood this, and after some thought, she decided to throw her towel in with the freedom movement and resign from the Order. In spite of this, however, Swami Brahmananda and other monks of the Order never withdrew their love and caring attention from her.

Sister Christine, however, had her own priorities. She decided to concentrate on what Swamiji had called her to India for, which was women's education. Though she worked with Nivedita at the school, she remained in the Ramakrishna Order as a brahmacharini for the rest of her life. But the freedom movement had her quiet support and sympathy, and she would sometimes express her opinions on things. According to Nivedita, Gokhale, the moderate President of the Congress Party, was very devoted to Christine. Probably Christine's temperament was more agreeable to him than Nivedita's.

After the Congress Party split into two factions—between the moderates and the extremists—Nivedita refused to attend their meetings. But Christine would attend if the meetings were held in Calcutta, and she would give Nivedita reports about the proceedings.

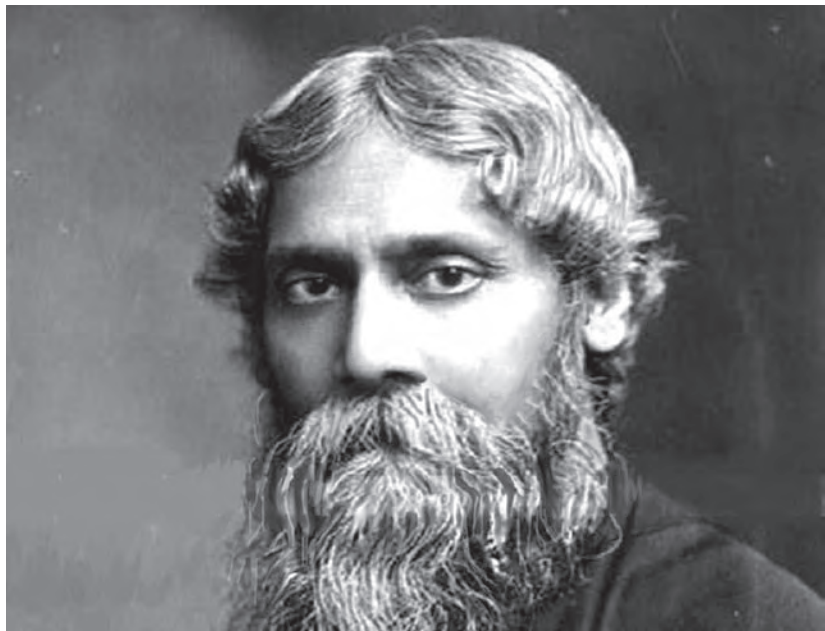
Like Nivedita, Christine had been a school teacher even before coming to India, so she had much experience in education. This was one of the reasons why Swamiji had brought her to India. We can also see from her reminiscences of Swamiji that she was a brilliant woman. She was no mere sidekick to Nivedita. Moreover, her loving, gentle, and motherly disposition endeared her to everyone—students, neighbours, servants, and visitors alike, as

well as to the monks of the Ramakrishna Order who knew her.<sup>26</sup> Because of her loving disposition, and also her hard work, the school blossomed under her direction. Not only did more and more young girls start coming, but soon an adult section was also started for women.

Nivedita often mentioned in her letters that Christine was really in charge of the school, and she had mixed emotions about it. Nivedita wanted to remain in charge. Being in control was her very nature. Yet she had very little connection with it anymore as she was spending most of her time writing and lecturing, or helping others with their writing. She probably also felt that the school was her sheet anchor—the one thing that kept her focused on something other than politics. Moreover, because she saw that Christine was really fulfilling the role that Swamiji had brought her to India for, she wondered sometimes if she had failed him. But there was one thing that she did do for the school, and that was to get money for it—and also for Christine.

When we look through Nivedita's letters we find that Christine and Nivedita had a very close relationship. In her letters, Nivedita sometimes just referred to Christine as 'my sister', knowing that the reader of the letter would know who

*Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)*



she meant. As Christine had no money of her own to maintain herself in India, Nivedita took on the responsibility of getting money for her. And she did it with great earnestness. In a letter to Josephine MacLeod, dated 13 Nov 1908, Nivedita wrote: 'I do PRAY that Swami means me to get money for Christine! I am no good to Him—but SHE is!'<sup>27</sup>

But just as Nivedita was devoted to Christine, Christine was also devoted to Nivedita. In 1905, after Nivedita had been seriously ill for several weeks, she wrote to Josephine MacLeod: 'She [Christine] was a loyal American to the finger-tips, I can tell you. It was like the mother-hen fighting for her brood. But I was so nervous about her, all the time, for she is very delicate you know, and yet she would fan me, *standing*, for hours at a time and—in the beginning—remain up night and day, till I felt sure she would be ill! Only I *had* to accept—being past the stage of lifting a finger' (2.734, italics added).

Yet for many years there has been current the story of the estrangement between Nivedita and Christine at the end of Nivedita's life. After going through Nivedita's letters, however, I had to wonder: Is this true? Or has fiction been passed off as fact? It *is* true that Nivedita was difficult to live with, and she herself had to admit it. In a letter to Josephine MacLeod, she wrote: '[Dr. Bose] told me very sweetly the other day that I could not have accepted from Christine, what she has accepted from me' (2.692). Moreover, when money became tight, the Sisters had to downsize to one house instead of two. This meant 'crowding,' and, as Nivedita wrote, '[Christine] wants freedom and scope—and I want quiet' (2.1100). Nivedita then thought of renting some rooms outside for some personal space.

Yet, does this mean that Christine abandoned ship and severed connections with Nivedita and

the school that she had worked so hard for—that she left in 1911 to teach in the Brahmo school, not to return? This is what the story has been so far. But let's take another look: In June 1911 we find that both Christine and Nivedita were at Mayavati along with the Boses. Nivedita wrote: 'Christine remains here, till October. After that her plans are in some uncertainty' (2.1206). At that time, after the death of Sara Bull, the money that Mrs Bull was giving for the school and for Christine had dried up. Mrs Bull was basically supporting both. Though Mrs Bull had included the school and Christine in her will, her daughter was contesting it in court. Everything looked bleak. Nivedita admitted that the school could not be run much longer.

At this point Mrs Bose made a suggestion. Nivedita wrote to the Ratcliffes on 12 June 1911: 'Bo [Mrs. Bose] is very ambitious to establish a training class for teachers, at the Brahmo School—and we discuss plans for this—in considerable detail. A syllabus seems to have been issued which is not altogether absurd in theory' (2.1205). So the idea for teaching at the Brahmo School came from Mrs Bose, and was discussed among them. Thus, teaching there was not a surprise move on Christine's part. Both Christine and the school badly needed money, and this was a natural solution for both problems.

In August 1911, Nivedita at last learned that, due to the sudden death of Mrs Bull's daughter, some money would be coming—though, as Nivedita says, 'It does not leave us rich' (2.1218).

On 31 August, she wrote to the Ratcliffes: You know by this time that we are not to be quite so easy in our circumstances as she [Mrs Bull] wished to make us. But there will be enough for a home, and the school is provided for, for the present. Meanwhile Christine has undertaken *a year's* work at the Brahmo Somaj—training teachers, and supervising the primary

school. This is not so much for a salary, as for the open air which her present state of health render imperatively necessary. I think she will gain much strength and breadth of view from this experience. *This [meaning their own school] will continue to be her head quarters* (2.1227, italics added).

The same day Nivedita wrote Miss MacLeod: 'Christine has decided to go to the Brahmo School *for a year*, as trainer of a class of teachers there, and Head of the lower school. In that capacity she will earn money. ... *She will continue to have her home here—and, I trust, to spend week-ends here, and holidays*' (2.1228, italics added).

So much for the estrangement.

Christine was still at Mayavati when Nivedita became ill in Darjeeling. When she got word of Nivedita's illness, she immediately started packing to go there, but before she could set off, she was informed of Nivedita's death. It was too late.

It is understandable, for many reasons, that Indians adore Nivedita. But for many Western women, Sister Christine is a wonderful role model. It's time to honour her also.

We started with breakfast. Some, like Dr Bose, even stayed for lunch. But one day there was a very special tea. On 3 March 1910, Nivedita wrote to her sister May: 'An extraordinary thing happened yesterday, which ought for the next few months to relieve us of the constant harassment of the police. Lady Minto [the wife of the Viceroy of India, Lord Minto] came to see us, in the morning, privately. We had a long intimate talk, and showed her the School. ... A little American woman who came to see us a few weeks ago, and fell in love with the whole thing, brought her. As [Dr Bose] says "Only the audacity of an American could have dreamt of it"' (2.1074). Nivedita, however, gave the credit for it to Swamiji. 'So like Swamiji,' she wrote in another letter, referring to this incident (2.1076).

But the matter did not end there. When Lady Minto mentioned that she did not like the Kalighat Temple in South Calcutta, Nivedita and Christine took her to the Kali temple in Dakshineswar, and she enjoyed the relaxed trip immensely. As Nivedita wrote: 'The *Vicereine* was duly taken to Dukineswar on Tuesday last, and came down the river to the Hay-Ghats, in a little boat—drinking tea out of *Swadeshi* cups, and then, when tea was over, chatting in the starlight. ... She is a dear sweet motherly woman, whose feeling for her husband is a perfect thing' (2.1077).

But a proper British woman would, of course, send an invitation in return. On 17 March 1910, Nivedita wrote Miss MacLeod: 'I was almost forgetting to tell you that tomorrow we [Nivedita and Christine] go by special invitation to see Lady Minto at noon. So you see, we are quite magnificent now! I think she really enjoyed the expedition also in the little boat, which you will understand. She has asked us to bring her some swadeshi biscuits and we are also going

Postal Stamp on Lady Minto






to sacrifice to her a sketch from Ajanta by one of the clever young artists of the new school' (2.1080).

Lady Minto encouraged Nivedita to go on with her writing, and she also asked her to meet the Commissioner of Police. Most likely after a few words from Lady Minto behind the scene, things went on smoothly for a few more months for Nivedita. This meeting with Lady Minto happened at a critical time for Nivedita. At this time the police were trying to arrest Aurobindo Ghosh—and, as Nivedita was closely connected with him, she would have been under much surveillance by the police. This is why Nivedita said, 'So like Swamiji'—that is, Swamiji arranged all this to protect her.

Though Nivedita knew that Lord Minto was doing what he could to ease the situation with the Indians after the disastrous rule of Lord Curzon, still this event helped Nivedita see this British ruler and his wife from a very human point of view—a view that affected her deeply. As Nivedita wrote the Ratcliffes, 'She [meaning, Lady Minto] is a dear' (2.1107).

Shortly after this, Lord Minto's term as Viceroy came to an end, and he and Lady Minto returned to England. But, thanks in good measure to Nivedita and Christine, Lady Minto returned with a genuine appreciation for India and Indian culture. So here too—even with the British Raj—there was a meeting of great minds. 

## Notes and References

1. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1982), 1.520–1.
2. Barbara Foxe, *Long Journey Home* (London: Rider, 1975), 172.
3. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.813.
4. See Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1999), 183.
5. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.1057.
6. However, according to John Keay, this split was narrowly averted in 1906, but went through in 1907. At that time 'Swadeshi ideals were extended to educational reform, labour organisation, self-help programmes and cultural activities. But in advocating a total boycott amounting to non-co-operation and including non-payment of taxes, "Lal, Bal and Pal" invited a ferocious government clampdown.' see John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Grove, 2010), 466–7.
7. See *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.1059.
8. *Long Journey Home*, 198.
9. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.1085.
10. *Long Journey Home*, 197.
11. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.1068–9.
12. See *Sister Nivedita*, illustration opposite 240.
13. *Long Journey Home*, 198.
14. Sister Devamata, *Days in an Indian Monastery* (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 274–5.
15. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.763.
16. *Long Journey Home*, 190.
17. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.989.
18. *Long Journey Home*, 191.
19. *Sister Nivedita*, 244.
20. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.686.
21. *Sister Nivedita*, 244.
22. Tagore composed the music for the stirring patriotic hymn, 'Bande Mataram', which was soon banned by the British. The words were written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. And after 1913, when he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature, he had even more leverage. For example, he was the first to call Gandhi 'Mahatma'. And he renounced his knighthood in 1919 in protest over the massacre by General Dyer and his troops of over a thousand innocent men, women, and children at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar.
23. Sister Nivedita, *The Web of Indian Life* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1950), xi.
24. *Sister Nivedita*, 245.
25. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.1013.
26. For further information about Sister Christine, see Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *A Portrait of Sister Christine* (Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1996).
27. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.928.





## ***Sister Nivedita: Offering of Grace***

**Prema Nandakumar**

**I** COULD SIMPLY BEGIN THUS: I am writing now because of Sister Nivedita. I would be literally and metaphorically correct. It is true that Indian women have entered the worlds of knowledge in a big way because a

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young Irish lady dedicated herself totally at the feet of her guru to serve India. The guru was Swami Vivekananda.

When Swamiji was going around India to get a first-hand idea of the needs of his motherland, he realised that two areas cried out for immediate action: the world of dalits and the world of women. Action needed the backing of money.

He resolved now to go to the United States to earn funds for his work. After his speech at the Chicago Convention in 1893, he glowed like a flame atop a hill in the western world. On his way back to India, he tarried in London to give a few speeches in 1895. He may not have got the expected funds in England but he received the priceless gift of a peerless disciple, Sister Nivedita.

Margaret Elizabeth Noble (1867–1911) was the child of an Irish family, religious and patriotic. Having received a good education, she chose the profession of a schoolteacher, and was happy to be one. Even as she taught, she kept improving herself by continuing to study, and became a good orator and journalist. She was also very much in demand as a journalist writing for *Wimbledon News*, *Daily News*, and *Review of Reviews*. Hers was an enquiring mind as she was no stranger to disappointments. Twice she had to face disillusionment in love. What is this life? Is there nothing more than living for oneself? Living seemed pointless without an aim, without an ideal. Then came the invitation to Lady Isabel Margesson's home to attend a speech by a renunciate from India.

When Margaret entered Lady Isabel's drawing room, she found a tall and well-built young man in ochre robes sitting self-lost in a chair. As the audience remained completely silent, full of expectancy, a prayer rose from Swamiji: 'Shiva, Shiva, namah Shivaya!' His listeners remained spell-bound, while Swamiji spoke in well-modulated tones using well-chosen and most appropriate words from the English language, but simple, direct and ah! so close to their heart. Margaret was all attention. She took her time to check whether her heart was responding in the right direction. She attended more lectures by Swamiji and took part in group discussions. She was a strong person, ready to face challenges

and Swamiji's invitation gave her exactly that. Would she help bring education to India's marginalised masses which included Indian women as well?: 'I have been making plans for educating the women of my country. I think you could be of great help to me.'<sup>1</sup>

There followed a couple of years of correspondence, Swamiji patiently answered her questions. Once Margaret took a decision, there was no going back. She also firmly believed in the simple assurance given to her by her guru: 'I promise you, I will stand by you unto death ... *"The tusks of the elephant come out, but never go back"*'; so are the words of a man never retracted.'<sup>2</sup>

She came in 1898 and was initiated by Swami Vivekananda on 25 March at Belur and became a probationer of the Order of Sri Ramakrishna, and was given the name, Nivedita. After a session of meditation and music in which the monks participated, Swamiji pointed to the opposite bank of the Ganges and said: 'Nivedita, that is where I should like to have a convent for women. Like a bird that needs two wings to fly, India must have both educated men and educated women.'<sup>3</sup>

This was a time when Indian women were still strangers to education and had no idea that if they could become self-supporting, the tyranny of a patriarchal society could be shown the door. After proving her grit to her guru by plunging into plague-relief in Calcutta, she opened the first school for girls in November of the same year. Among the problems were the unwillingness of the families to educate the girl child, the lack of money, and her own need to master Indian philosophical and religious literature so that she could be a worthy novice of the Order. So she travelled abroad to collect funds for her school; she travelled all over India to understand this continent. She found out that this was no Continent of Circe but that



of Sarasvati. Never was a moment wasted by her. Always working, reading, or writing and of course, meditating. If there was divine passion in what she wrote about Indian culture, Sri Ramakrishna, and Mother Kali, there was an unstoppable force in her services for women's education and India's freedom movement.

When the eminent scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, was subjected to racial discrimination, she boldly came to his help, rendering editorial assistance for preparing his research papers and getting sponsorships for him. And how can one gauge the depth of her services for the freedom movement of this nation! She was a highly valued friend of nationalist leaders like Bhupendranath Datta, Sri Aurobindo, and Barindra Kumar Ghose. These were heroes of the movement and naturally they admired her for her readiness to face danger. Who would not admire her who wore but a flowing robe and a garland of *rudraksha* beads and went around as a fashionable foreign lady on an errand and was not recognised even by her own friends!

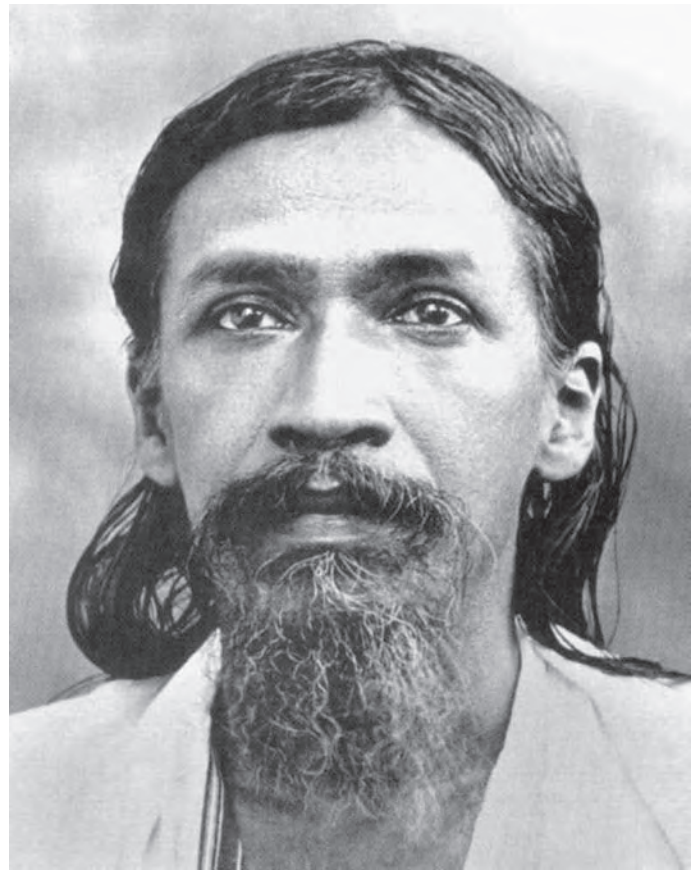
All the same, Nivedita did become a suspect in the eyes of the British Raj. When Bhupendranath Datta, the editor of the nationalist paper, *Jugantar*, was arrested, she even emptied her personal coffers to raise money for his bail and helped other members of the magazine office as well. When it became known that the Raj was prepared to act against her, her nationalist friends begged her to withdraw from the field of action for a while, for their sake. She spent 1907–8 abroad. It was a much-needed change for her to rest, recuperate, take up her lecturing and journalism to an adoring public. All the time her eyes were fixed back on her Mother India which had become her land of destiny:

She was the center of attraction at Lady Sandwich's salon. On the day she spoke of her Bagh Bazar school, Emma Calvé gave a recital. When

she described her trip to the famine-stricken regions, at the Russian Embassy, people rushed there to hear her. After the Duchess of Albany suddenly decided to attend one of her meetings, the English aristocracy took her to their hearts. The women questioned her and envied her freedom. The men were flattered by the ironic wisdom of her arguments. The doors of the House of Commons were opened to her whenever Indian affairs were on the agenda. She was not wasting her time (340).

She never did. She was the apt pupil of Swami Vivekananda in this matter as well. Nivedita never wasted time in mindless conversations or looking before and after. If she had a disappointment, a shiver of frustration, or even self-pity, she never brooded on such expendable emotions. A brief note in her personal journal was enough to act as a cathartic. During these two years abroad, she visited Ireland and it was an emotional return to the country of her birth. There is an undercurrent of poignancy in Ms

*Sri Aurobindo*





Bhupendranath Datta (1880–1961)

Reymond's description of the scene:

She greeted the trees, the ivy, the hedges that imprisoned the wandering night fogs. Everywhere the wind-swept ruins and the sea spray told her of perennial struggles, and of the traces of an ancient pre-Christian Aryan culture. She stopped to speak with the laborers in the fields, and heard them boasting about Ireland, with a passionate longing for liberty. Before their hardened and vigorous faces she wept over the fate of the Hindus who were so ill prepared for the struggle. Seeing this, her brother felt a pang

of jealousy because Ireland had been ousted by India in her heart (341).

Sister Nivedita's travels in the US were good but she had to rush back to England. After her mother's calm passing, Nivedita returned to India and was once again drawn into helping the nationalists in a big way. When Sri Aurobindo had to go away first to Chandannagore and then to Pondicherry, she edited his *Karmayogin* with brilliant and incisive penmanship. She was certain that the spirit of Swamiji was guiding Sri Aurobindo both in his political and spiritual work. For many months no one knew where he was, such was the vigour with which Sister Nivedita filled up the journal's spaces. And when its work was done and *Karmayogin* was folding up, she published her credo which she has also left behind for us all as a guardian-charm for sculpting our lives:

I believe that India is one, indissoluble, indivisible. National Unity is built on the common home, the common interest, and the common love.

I believe that the strength which spoke in the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, in the making of religions and empires, in the learning of scholars and the meditation of the saints, is born once more amongst us, and its name today is Nationality.

I believe that the present of India is deep-rooted in her past, and that before her shines a glorious future (351).

She never wrote a sentence in vain. Always the words came from her heart. She had trained herself so from her younger days and Truth became her flagstaff after she became the disciple of Swamiji. Though the general public had access to her classics like *Kali the Mother*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, *Footfalls of Indian History*, *The Web of Indian Life*, and *The Master as I saw Him*, and there was also a collected edition of



her speeches and papers, it was only when Lizzelle Reymond published her well-researched work on Sister Nivedita in 1953 that the complete woman moulded as a classical Indian heroine appeared before us.

Like them—Draupadi, Sita, Savitri—Nivedita was no stranger to sorrow and pain. When she gave her allegiance, it was total. She had come to India to educate girl children, and just as she drew them close to her heart, the Indian nation itself became her mother. She had been an activist in the Irish desire to be freed from British overlordship. So she knew the sorrow of belonging to a subject nation. With the same passion for Irish freedom, Margaret now began to work for the freedom of Mother India. Swamiji had ordained her into the Ramakrishna Order and given her the name ‘Nivedita.’ So apt, for had she not offered her entire being to the Divine’s work in India? And as perfect a description of her work in India is Swamiji’s blessing to Nivedita, long before she would become involved in the freedom struggle of the nation: let us remember that a guru’s blessing is never in vain.

The mother’s heart, the hero’s will,  
The sweetness of the southern breeze,  
The sacred charm and strength that dwell  
On Aryan altars, flaming, free;  
All these be yours, and many more  
No ancient soul could dream before—  
Be thou to India’s future son  
The mistress, servant, friend in one.<sup>4</sup>

As one who was working with the nationalists, she knew what exactly the need of the hour was. Hence she promoted domestic industries since economic self-dependence was a key factor for a free nation. *Svadeshi!* She was tireless in encouraging young men to come forward and take responsible positions in the work; she managed to send some of them to England, the US, and Japan where they learnt new techniques. Thus she furthered the dimensions of Swamiji’s

neo-Vedanta that did not forget the society, nor its elemental needs like freedom and pride in the nation.

She [Sister Nivedita] sought a spirituality that was eminently practical, that mingled with life and had become a part of life. Whenever she discovered some foreign article in the stock of a shop in the bazaar, she was furiously angry. But the most simple Hindu wares—an earthenware cup, a finely made oil lamp costing less than one cent—were full of charm for her. They became the subject of newspaper articles. Her descriptions emphasised the elegance of simple lines, and established canons of taste. She revealed beauties which the Hindus themselves had failed to see, and which they discovered with her.<sup>5</sup>

Such was her timely intervention to stop the juggernaut of Western culture which had already destroyed much of the glory and good in Indian culture. English education had thrown on the wayside the priceless Sanskrit heritage. Fortunately, Sister Nivedita’s *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, started a trend among Indians to go back to their ancient tales and legends, write about them in a simple style and thus helped the English-educated Indian to return to his own life-giving sources. By writing vividly about her pilgrimages, she instilled in the Indian a pride in his past and even a touch of shame for having neglected his art, architecture, and painting. She had no sympathy for the westerner who said Indians have no sense of history while this was a unique land which was itself history.

If India itself be the book of Indian history, it follows that travel is the true means of reading that history. The truth of this statement, especially while the published renderings of our history remain so inadequate and so distorted, ought never to be forgotten. Travel as a mode of study is of infinite importance. Yet it is not everything. It is quite possible to travel the

world over and see nothing, or only what is not true. We see, after all, only what we are prepared to see. How to develop the mind of the taught, so that it shall see, not what its teacher has led it to expect, but the fact that actually passes before the eyes is the problem of all right scientific education. In history also, we want to be able to see, not the thing that would be pleasant, but the thing that is true.<sup>6</sup>

Travelling to places is nothing new in Indian culture for pilgrimages are part of the religious and spiritual training of the Indian. For instance, the pilgrimages of Acharya Shankara, Acharya Ramanuja, and other spiritual luminaries have been recorded in extenso. Indeed, sannyasa itself seems to have been equated with

*Subramania Bharati (1882–1921)*



wide travels as the aspirant for monkhood was expected to go on a long pilgrimage. Swamiji spent a few years wandering to sacred places in India, before he went to America. Sister Nivedita had known all this. However, she felt that this has also kept the Indian away from keeping her or his eyes and ears open to 'other' beauties and significant spaces in these pilgrim spots. She or he took it for granted that it was all familiar once she or he heard the name of the spot or the religion associated with it most. Yet she or he was not separatist, rejected nothing and ever pressed forward towards a glorious synthesis which is why there are so many layers of history imbedded in all of India. Which is all the more reason for the modern Indian to travel with his eyes and ears open:

But one of the master-facts in Indian history, a fact borne in upon us more deeply with every hour of study, is that India is and always has been a synthesis. No amount of analysis, racial, lingual, or territorial, will ever amount in the sum to the study of India. Perhaps the axioms of Euclid are not axioms after all. Perhaps all the parts of a whole are not equal to the whole. At any rate, apart from and above, all the fragments which must be added together to make India, we have to recognise India herself, all-containing, all-dominating, moulding and shaping the destinies and the very nature of the elements out of which she is composed. The Indian people may be defective in the methods of mechanical organisation, but they have been lacking, as a people, in none of the essentials of organic synthesis. No Indian province has lived unto itself, pursuing its own development, following its own path, going its way unchallenged and alone (13).

What a tremendously intuitive summing up of the character of a nation! There is no aspect of Indian culture that Nivedita touched upon without making it glitter brilliantly, warts and

all. She was so totally stationed in Truth that the right words came to her, as she absorbed the history and culture of the nation at first hand. She was saddened, even angered, at the way the Indian male had treated women and the society had set aside a group as 'untouchables'. Swamiji's views were taken up by her and studied in depth with the relevant literature. As one concentrating upon women's empowerment, Vaishnavism came to her as a breath of fresh air. Hadn't Chaitanya's advent helped Indian womanhood for a while? Meera had gone in search of Vrindavan and thereby gained emancipation. And Nityananda's receiving thirteen hundred women into the congregation proves the strong conviction of the Vaishnava that women too had as important a part in the life of a nation's religion. All this and more we learn when we turn the pages of her books.

Sister Nivedita was an icon from my childhood because the celebrated Tamil patriot-poet Subramania Bharati had saluted her as his guru. He met her in Calcutta and immediately recognised in her a burning brazier of pure shakti. She was unhappy that he had not brought his wife Chellamma to the Congress session 'as she would not understand about great Movements like the Congress'. With her characteristic directness she gave vent to her anger and pain: 'How can one half of a society win freedom when it enslaves the other half? Let the past be forgotten. Henceforth, hold her as your left hand and praise her in your heart as an angel.'<sup>7</sup>

It was during this encounter that Bharati received a lesson in equality as she asked him to forget all these differences of gender, caste, class, and birth. A nationalist was an Indian, a child of Bharat Mata. So how can there be differences between children of the same mother? Also, the patriotic Indian must first prepare to

send the foreign oppressor away! 'Your people must become brave. You must have daring to stab us here!'<sup>8</sup>

This is how the Brahmin journalist-poet from Tamil Nadu became an intense disciple of Sister Nivedita. He dedicated his first two books of poems to her and preserved the leaf of a Himalayan tree she gave him and revered it till the end of his life. She was a major inspiration for his group of poems on Bharat Mata and Shakti.

Sister Nivedita passed away on 11 October 1911. However, Bharati's gem-like poem is a living memorial to Sister Nivedita, the flaming pioneer of the omnipotent Shakti who had come to befriend and guide the modern Indian woman, and after the passing of her guru in 1902, remained in India to guide the entire nation as well:

Nivedita, Mother,  
Temple consecrated to love,  
Sun dispelling my soul's darkness,  
Rain to the parched land of our lives,  
Helper of the helpless, Offering of Grace,  
Destructive fire to the evil in men,  
My salutation to you, Mother.<sup>9</sup>

PB

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4. *Complete Works*, 6.178.
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7. Prof. K N Vaswani, 'Subramania Bharati: Poet, Patriot and Seer', *Yuva Bharati*, 10/1 (August 1982), 23.
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# Indian Women in the Letters of Sister Nivedita

Dr Suruchi Pande



Sarala Devi Ghoshal (1872–1945)

LETTERS OF SISTER NIVEDITA give us a different experience of her brilliant observations and sensitivity. Her unique style of documentation is a typical characteristic feature of her British upbringing. Her notes and readings on Indian women and women's education

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from various strata provide us important social aspects. She has referred to Sarala Ghoshal, Abala Basu, Ms Sorabji, Ramabai, and many other lay as well as prominent women of that time. I have tried to restrict myself to some references related to her work, inner development, and women with whom she had a close acquaintance as reflected in her letters. Here I have selected some of her letters and I have referred to the two volumes of *Letters of Sister Nivedita*.<sup>1</sup>

She was perfectly aware of constructive aspects of Indian women, their values and she also felt the necessity to have a great spread of education. She understood that there was a need of having trained nurses.

It is important and interesting to note that Sister Nivedita is beautifully independent in her thinking and she is extremely frank in her opinions. She was initiated to develop and establish the idea of a monastery for Hindu nuns. She was a hardcore and down to earth karmayogini who disapproved hypocrisy. In one of her letters to Miss J Macleod, dated 8 December 1904, she wrote:

I have just been having a long argument with a boy—oh Yum!—if you only knew how the contempt for secular life and activity has eaten into the heart of this people! If you only knew how spiritual vanity leads them into thinking that a great aspiration *is* greatness, instead of vigorously exacting from themselves the toll of work and self-sacrifice at every inch of the road! A man who wears the Sannyasin's grab will speak of a man far greater and braver than

himself, with contempt, merely because *he* is not a Sannyasin.

And yet I dare not trust altogether to myself and my own judgment, for you know Swamiji was generally down on me about something or other—and yet perhaps He only wanted to force me into working out my own way, with a whole heart—and indeed *I CAN* work no other! (2.702).

### ***Sister Nivedita on Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi***

Sister Nivedita developed a special relation with Sri Sarada Devi. And Swami Vivekananda was particularly happy for that because acceptance of his foreign friends and disciples by Holy Mother was a sign of great social significance. Nivedita has sent the detailed sketch of Holy Mother to Mrs Eric Hammond—Nell—in her letter dated 22 May 1898. She writes:

I have often thought that I ought to tell you the lady who was the Wife of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada as her name is. To begin with, she is dressed in a white cotton cloth like any other Hindu widow under 50. This cloth goes round the waist and forms a skirt, then it passes round the body and over the head like a nun's veil. When a man speaks to her, he stands behind her, and she pulls this white veil very far forward over her face. Nor does she answer him directly. She speaks to another and older woman in almost a whisper, and this woman repeats her words to the man. In this way it comes about that the Master [Vivekananda] has never seen the face of Sarada! Added to this, you must try to imagine her always seated on the floor, on small piece of bamboo matting. All this does not sound very sensible perhaps, yet this woman, when you know her well, is said to be the very soul of practicality and common-sense, as she certainly gives every token of being, to those who know her slightly. Sri Ramakrishna always consulted her before

undertaking anything and her advice is always acted upon by his disciples. She is the very soul of sweetness—*so* gentle and loving and as merry as a girl. You should have heard her laugh the other day when I insisted that the Swami must come up and see us at once, or we would go home. The monk who had brought the message that the Master would delay seeing us was quite alarmed at my moving towards my shoes, and departed post haste to bring him up, and then you should have heard Sarada's laughter! It just pealed out. And she is so tender—'my daughter' she calls me. She has always been terribly orthodox, but all this melted away the instant she saw the first two Westerns—Mrs. Bull and Miss Macleod, and she tasted food with them! Fruit is always presented to us immediately, and this was naturally offered to her, and she to the surprise of everyone accepted. This gave us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could possibly have done. Isn't it funny? The best proof I can give you of her real greatness is that she is always attended when in Calcutta by 14 or 15 high caste ladies, who would be rebellious and quarrelsome and give infinite trouble to everyone if she by her wonderful tact and winsomeness did not keep perpetual peace. There is no foundation for this statement in the character of these ladies. It is only my inference about women in general.

Then you should see the chivalrous feeling that the monks have for her. They always call her 'Mother' and speak of her as 'The Holy Mother'—and she is literally their first thought in every emergency. There are always one or two in attendance on her, and whatever her wish is, it is their command. It is a wonderful relationship to watch. I should love to give her a message from you, if you care to send to her one. A monk read the Magnificat in Bengali to her one day for me, and you should have seen how she enjoyed it. She really is, under the simplest, most unassuming guise, one of the strongest and greatest of women (1.9–10).

Sister Nivedita's letter to Mrs Ole Bull dated

5 March 1905 has a reference to Sri Rama-krishna's birthday and their visit to the Math. Here she has beautifully expressed the memory of the sweet, meditative personality of Holy Mother. She writes,

And yet, on the soul-side, Sri Ram Krishna is a baby today—and we ask nothing of babies. We give all. So the air is full of worship—and the evening bells sounding at this moment are *so* sweet! Life without meaning—what an infinite relief! All evening and starlight, and the new moon and prayer. It is like the Holy Mother's presence. That too, is like the concentrated sweetness of the twilight—especially when she is at worship—oh, how wonderful! (2.726)

### Indian Women and Sister Nivedita

We know the history and development of the girl's school initiated by Sister Nivedita. But slowly her stream of work started taking a different direction. Sister Nivedita is so honest in her contemplation when she writes to Miss J Macleod in a letter dated 24 July 1902(?). She says:

We talk of 'Woman-making.' But the great stream of the Oriental woman's life flows on—who am I that I should seek in anyway to change it? Suppose even that I could add my impress to 10 to 12 girls—would it be so much gain? Is it not rather by taking the *national* consciousness of the women like that of the men, and getting it towards greater problems and responsibilities, that one can help? Then, when they have surveyed the *great* scheme, have they not already become open to new views of life and necessity? Will they not achieve these for themselves? (1.482)

Sister Nivedita is always very sympathetic whenever she writes about Indian women. She appreciates their qualities and hopes for their betterment. Her sister Mrs Wilson sent some money for Nivedita. While replying her in a letter dated 29 January 1903, she wrote, 'Monday

next is the Day of Saraswati—our Indian Minerva and 50 poor widows are to have 1/S worth of provisions each—your money goes to this! The widows are not to be beggars you know but 'decayed gentlewomen'—just the class you will love to help' (2.541).

Sister Nivedita's heart always ached when she saw agony and suffering. She tried to help out in whatever way possible to her. This is seen when she attempted to seek financial help for curing a poor girl. She wrote to Miss J Macleod in a letter dated 26 March 1903, 'If you will give me 100 rupees for a certain case, I shall be very glad. A little girl here of a respectable but poor family has got white leprosy. She has had it a year. She is 9 or 10 years old and in a year or two will have to be married. An allopathic doctor thinks he can cure her with 5 months treatment, cost about 15/- a month. I trusted to your donation and undertook the case. Was I right?' (2.548). Nivedita received the help she needed. She has kept a track and again she has given the updated news to Miss J Macleod in a letter dated 14 January 1904, by writing, 'Your little girl is cured of her leprosy. Are you not glad?' (2.619).

Sister Nivedita respected marriage system and a place of a woman in it. In one of her letters she has seriously analysed the mind of a woman.

On 12 July 1905, she writes to Miss J Macleod,

Marriage, to be kept ideal, means walking on a path long and difficult, sharp as the edge of a razor, and the way *so* hard to find! It is, for good women, ... no yielding to a thirst, no yielding, or self-indulgence of any kind. It is a great *giving*, an infinite tenderness, a solemn quiet and joy—and *such* a compassion! ... Motherhood and worship at once.

But why do I say all this? Because I feel that you and I have gone through much torture and confusion of mind from the fact that Swamiji was a *man*, and could see women only from

the outside. All that He taught us was true, of course, but it was not the whole truth. Indeed I almost venture to say that He lived in many things more truly than He spoke. As He felt that Sri RK [Ramakrishna] lived a life which He could not Himself have explained, so I often feel that Swamiji Himself *taught* the things that had come to Him from the past—from the historic past—from his discipleship—from Samadhi—from the books—but all this, which to others would have been the end, the goal, to Him was only the starting point. ... He *talked* as if the things said of women by the books were true. But what did He live? He lived as if women were minds, *not* bodies. He made the highest demands. He assumed that they were selfless. And His demands were answered. And my conclusion is that He saw life unconsciously as an organic whole, in which each part was justified, that marriage is a *puja*—a ritual—a temple—a worship; that widowhood is nunhood; that the servant of man is far far higher than the saint (but also rarer). ...

I am sure too that there is no special thing called a wife, or a wife's love. Love is one, undifferentiated (2.742–3).

Sister Nivedita took care of Gopaler Ma till her last breath. She was so sensitive that she performed the *shraddha* ritual for Gopaler ma. We come across this reference in her letter written to Miss J Macleod on 18 July 1906. She writes, '[Gopaler Ma] died on Sunday morning the 8th at dawn, and today we are holding festival for her release' (2.820).


Nivedita used to think of possibilities and avenues for women's education in India. In a letter written to Alberta Sturges [Lady Sandwich] on 27 September 1908, she writes:

Everyone acquainted with Eastern countries knows that their great outstanding problem at present and for many years to come must be that of the education of their women. ... And everyone including the Government admits it



Gopaler Ma (1822–1906)

about India. ... The missionaries are mistaken because, whether right or wrong in their assertion of the present need of education, they are not in a position to discriminate rightly the elements of value in the existing training of the Oriental girl for life. Yet one fact remains that Oriental men are everyday becoming more and more imbued with a modern thought alphabet, which the women can by no means share with them or not to any great extent. The consequences to social life of having men and women in two different worlds, not cooperative but mutually antagonistic, each looking upon the other as, at best, un-vital, are best left to the imagination (2.913).

Nivedita has emphasised here the need of co-operation of men and women to avoid the moral, ethical, and intellectual decay of society. 

## References

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# ***Sister Nivedita's Unpublished Letters to Alberta Sturges Montagu***

**Sarada Sarkar**

## ***Background of the Research***

**S**ISTER NIVEDITA RUNS IN MY VEINS. My grandmother Labanyamoyee belonged to an orthodox Bengali family, Hatkhola Duttas. Sister Christine used to take my grandmother and the other sisters, from their family home to the school and brought them back after school every day. She would recall spending time on the lap of Sister Christine, also as a little girl she has touched the feet of the Holy Mother several times. They had to offer flowers to Mother's feet and offer salutations. Those were the tales of my childhood. So as a teacher in UK, Sister Nivedita has always inspired me.

## ***Meeting Lord John Montagu and Mrs Mary Pearson***

Lord Montagu and his cousin Mary Pearson met me in a cafe in central London after a prolonged email conversation for a few months. It was pouring heavily, the member of House of Lords, a member of aristocrat society of Great Britain was waiting humbly for me with his umbrella near the busy Sloane square tube station. The very caring, fatherly gentleman took me to the cafe where his cousin, Mary was waiting. I have never met any of the Royals before, never even met a member of the parliament of the upper house, and I was unsure on how to talk to them.

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Sarada Sarkar is a researcher and English teacher from Croydon, UK.

He must have been able to see that I was very nervous however, he eased my jangling nerves by eloquently saying that we have one common thing between us which is Swami Vivekananda. 'Before him we all are equal Sarada. Moreover, you are named after the Holy Mother, we both have been to Belur Math, so what else do you need in common?' Lord John Montagu is Alberta's grandson and a member of House of Lords. He is an adviser of Christian Aid, Anti-Slavery International, Save the Children, CARE International, member of several European Union sub committees.

The conversation over a cup of coffee was exceptional. Mrs Mary Pearson explained to me how the two families who befriended Swamiji came together through a marriage. The Leggett family in America and the Margessons in UK were related through the marriage between Francis and David. David was the child of Isabella and Mortimer Margesson. When the war came David Margesson was made secretary for state for war, quite a major position, by the then prime minister, Sir Winston Churchill. He didn't want this big promotion and rather wanted to stay as chief whip as before during the 1930s. David worked as secretary of state for war for about two years and then resigned. He then received peerage and became a member of House of Lords. David's daughter is very frail and weak but still living in London, she is the mother of Mary Pearson. On the other hand, Mrs Mary

Pearson's grandmother was Francis Leggett who was the niece of Josephine Macleod. Mary also gave me the book called *Late and Soon* from her personal collection which describes a lot more about these two families.

Initially I thought that I would be just interviewing them for this journal, but didn't know that there will be such a huge surprise waiting for me there.

Mary went to Calcutta two years ago with her daughter and niece and went to Belur Math for a day, she still treasures the moment. She said her daughter was very keen to see the place of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. Mary's daughter wanted to visit again. She immediately showed me a photograph from her phone; it was with the Reverend President Swami of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. She mentioned Rhodie Margesson, her cousin in America who may be interested to travel to India next year to observe the celebration of Sister Nivedita's 150th-year celebrations, but was not so sure about that.

I requested both Lord Montagu and Mary to look for any letters, diaries, photographs or even clothes in their family archives so that it can be displayed in the museum of 16 Bosepara Lane which is in the process of construction. Pravrajika Areshaprana had asked me to enquire about this.

To my surprise an email came from Mary Pearson saying that both cousins went to Maperton house—the family home of the Montagus—to look through the family papers and they found some letters of Sister Nivedita written to Alberta Sturges Montagu and that she wished to hand them over to me. She also said that I can look through their family album for any unpublished photographs of Sister Nivedita. With their permission these letters are published here and will be displayed in museums for at least one year, as the family may want the originals back later on.

Before I move on to the letters, I must express my heartfelt gratitude on behalf of all followers of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda traditions to this sacred family with a special salutation to Josephine Macleod.

### **Unpublished Letters of Sister Nivedita and Josephine Macleod**

I am grateful to Swami Narasimhananda, the present editor of *Prabuddha Bharata* for fluently transcribing these letters.

### **Sister Nivedita's Letters to Alberta**

1

At Darjeeling

Address 17 Bose Para Lane  
Bagh Bazaar, Calcutta.  
Monday July 12.03.

My dearest Albert,

It was indeed terribly sad to hear from S. Sara how very ill you had been for many months. Then your own beautiful letter came, in which you admitted the trouble with the heart. And yet I think these weeks and months of withdrawal into God and Nature will be an infinite joy and benediction. It is you who are silent and retired in this way, who are, I think, the real strength of us who work.

Since I began to write, I review your letter saying Hollister is to be with you.

[Page 2]

I cannot tell you how glad I am. I know how happy it will make you both to be together. And I am so very glad that you had that beautiful time with Mrs Roethlisberger. I do not know how to say that I am doing anything, for my main business is to keep quiet and write all I can. A few very more chapters will finish my book, but you know these chapters are being difficult to write and sometimes they are only produced at the rate of one in several months. However, the remainder



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Page 2

Page 3

*Pages 4 and 5*

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[Page 3]

*must* be done more quickly than that, for S. Sara *must* take the MS with her to London, when she goes in November. One of those that remain is perhaps the most important and difficult of all. I have a great hope that after this book is finished, I shall be able to turn to the Life of Swamiji. That ought to be a great Nation-Maker if one is found something to write true things in a true way. And nation-making seems now the our great and true task. It is lovely to have S. Sara and to be

[Page 4]

here together in the Hills. I think Christine never felt mothered in her life before. We have a sweet home, with a great morning vision of seeing Kinchinjunga. And just at this moment Swami Saradananda is staying with us. S. Sara and I go down to Calcutta at the end of this week for a little while, and then back here. Yesterday, I went out for a 20 miles ride on horseback, to get over the fatigue of writing and today I am all stiff.

I have just received a beautiful little

[Page 4]

book of Sri RK's sayings from the New York Vedantists. I hope you will get it too, for it is lovely.

I am ashamed that I have nothing to tell you. I had much to say in the old days, when it was all struggle, but now I see my path so clearly. I only long to put aside all weights and the ignorance that doth so easily beset me and thru *thy*, like the Greek Niké—with wings and strength like hers. And in all that, there is nothing to say—is there?

Ever lovingly,

Margot.

2

17 Bose Para Lane  
Bagh Bazaar  
Calcutta.

Christmas Eve 1903.

My dearest Albert,

Your lovely letter has reached me on this day of the Christ-Child.

Dear friend! Your soul is always that of a man. But there is a manhood with which nothing in this world can interfere. A manhood which sees only pure souls—knows only great wills, moves [Page 2]

on self-dedicated to great ends, great thoughts. A manhood to which common life is all that is given for Bauddhas and altar heights flowers—and which makes it all into the mimic of the Church.

How strange it is dearest Albert that we whose new world is in the making should with such pain of heart lose

[Page 3]

our hold upon the old! But let us look up. By our solitude, we make the company that shall fill the future of others. By our burning of incense we satisfy the Church unborn. By our tears and lonely prayers we make stories of faith and hope for *them*. After all, dearest, it is benediction enough. And in our hearts as you say we carry His feet.

[Page 4]

I am in great haste. But I send you this Christmas wish and look to be named by you at the altar of the Holy Child tomorrow morning.

Ever most lovingly,

Margot.

3

17 Bose Para Lane  
Bagh Bazaar  
Calcutta April 14' 04.

My dear Albert,

Thank you so much for the picture *Prayers Ancient and Modern*, which reached me this week. They were dated March 1st—which was being sweet.

17 From Pancha  
Page 109  
Calcutta  
Christmas Eve 1903  
Dear Albert,  
Your lovely letter has  
reached me - on the day of the  
Christ Child.  
Dear Friend! You said in abundance that  
you were - that there is a world  
with which nothing in the  
world can interfere - a world  
which even only true souls -  
know only great truths - move

Page 1

to self-dedicated to great ends  
Great thoughts - a world  
to which common life is  
all that is given for themselves  
& other light flowers - to which  
makes it all into the music  
of the Church.  
How strange it is dear Albert  
that we who are world in  
the making should with  
such pain of heart look

Page 2

on hold upon the old! But  
let us look up. For our  
solitude we make the company  
that shall fill the future of  
others. For our burning  
of ourselves we sanctify the  
Church unborn. For our tears  
of sorrow for we make voices  
of faith & hope for them.  
After all - Albert - it is wonderful  
enough. And in her heart  
as you say, "to carry the best"

Page 3

I am in great haste. But I  
send you the Christmas  
card. & look & be named  
by you at the altar of the  
Holy Child tomorrow morning  
Your most lovingly  
Nivedita.

Page 4

## Unpublished Letters of Sister Nivedita to Alberta: Letter 2 Dated Christmas Eve 1903.

17 From Pancha  
Page 109  
Calcutta 1903  
Dear Albert,  
Thank you so much for  
the picture of Prayer & Prayer  
Prayer which reached me  
this week. They were dated  
March 1st - which was very  
good.  
I am afraid that I  
have in previous letters and

Page 1

missed. You do not quite know  
what one must look to them  
I shall have been writing from  
the same old place - but as they  
were perhaps written for  
publication, I will make  
up my mind to drop them.  
I have the scrap that one  
gives in the prayer book, as  
acts of faith & will & so on.  
"Great will of God & the world"  
and a word as that will  
be attended one with them!  
And then perhaps the  
prayer.  
In the prayer book there is a  
prayer "How true is the  
dream of life" which I  
sometimes use. But I get  
that of I send you together  
it is the only thing in the  
book that I like.  
I am sure that the  
prayer to a human being

Pages 2 and 3

interfere in the same way with  
one kind of the society.  
Prayer, a genuine prayer  
is surely always for one little  
thing at a time - it does  
seem to jump over the  
whole big world of our world  
like a prayer catalogue.  
This is the time & spirit  
that I am in. The  
best.  
We are full of faith & hope  
in the world! Christ is here  
but had more means - but  
believe the money will all  
come - & soon as we are used  
to it.  
Yes. I am not so sure  
about the money that a  
wonder for the nation's  
education! That is another  
matter.  
Let us go to go a man  
so common place in  
the world. For the  
world is here.

Pages 4 and 5

## Unpublished Letters of Sister Nivedita to Alberta: Letter 3 Dated 14 April 1904.

My Dear Nivedita  
 Page 1  
 Calcutta. April 16  
 Dear Nivedita  
 It is a great pleasure  
 that you are now near  
 home. I am about London.  
 I am. You said you were from  
 home. But as the days  
 nothing about it. I suppose you  
 are going to spend the  
 night. It is not worked out  
 in hope - although I am sure

Page 1

how shall it be - that the more  
 really this long enough with this  
 I suppose to be a case. I think  
 from the bottom is a sign that it is  
 done. He said - for you know she has  
 been home on her return - I had  
 almost said, on the point of the  
 return - for you know she has  
 everything depends on her  
 now. I am not sure.  
 I am sure many want to see  
 me in London this summer.  
 I wish to see her of  
 her thought my presence

Pages 2 and 3

absolutely necessary to the  
 least an interview with  
 Mr. & Mrs. Duffell. I suppose  
 of them was anticipated that  
 I should come. I think it is  
 at once.  
 What does your friend of the  
 the house look like? I found  
 found you in the house.  
 I am sure you are very good.  
 I am from the Academy &  
 Literature. I suppose. But  
 I think it is a very good

quite friendly. And you.  
 I am sure all the credit  
 of that office achievement.  
 I am according to the telegram.  
 It is said from Calcutta.  
 I suppose on Monday last.  
 I suppose the thought of your  
 I am sure that I shall  
 be in the house to be in  
 again.  
 Dear Nivedita. I am sure you will  
 be of you and I shall  
 then nothing could be

Pages 4 and 5

coming to be the point  
 between at Cliffton. I am.  
 I am sure you are in  
 in London - she is  
 I suppose - but then I think  
 will come to be in  
 I am sure on April 16.  
 I am sure you are in  
 I am sure you are in  
 all to be in the house

Pages 6 and 7

Unpublished Letters of Sister Nivedita to Alberta: Letter 4 Dated 16 April 1904.

I am afraid what I love in prayers however are  
 [Page 2]

unsigned. Nor do I quite know where one must  
 look for them. I should like Dora Counties  
 prayers and Madame dollars. But, or they were  
 perhaps written for publication. I shall make up  
 my mind to be disappointed.

I love the scrap that one gets in RC prayer  
 books as acts of faith and will and so on. 'Sweet will  
 of God and thee adore.' Such a word as that will  
 [Page 3]

so attend one with things. And then sublime  
 Hindu prayers. In the English Catholic's *Vade  
 Mecum* there is a hymn 'From times' false dreams

I flee', which I sometimes wish that I could get.  
 But I remember rightly it is the only thing in the  
 book that I like.

It is strange that the signature to a hymn does  
 [Page 4]

interfere in the same way with my sense of its sin-  
 cerity. Besides, a genuine prayer is surely always  
 for one little thing at a time—it never runs its  
 fingers over the whole keyboard of our wants like  
 a gracious catalogue. This seems to me to spoil  
 Robert Louis Stevenson. The rest we are full of  
 work and plans. Oh so much! Christine wishes  
 [Page 5]

we had more money, but I believe the money



will all come as soon as we are ready to use it. Darling, I am not so sure about the money that is wanted for the *nation's* education! That is another matter.

Ld. Curzon is for a man so commonplace, as *extraordinary* for a friend.

Ever lovingly,

Margot.

4

17 Bose Para Lane  
Bagh Bazaar  
Calcutta April 16, 04.

Dear Alberta,

It is nice to think that you are once more within reach, hovering about London and Paris. You said you were going to see Yum, but as she says nothing about it, I suppose you are going to surprise her. I hope it is not wicked of me to hope—although I can imagine

[Page 2]

how dull it is—that she may really stay long enough with Pastor Kuripp to establish a cure. I think even the delusion is a sign that it is doing the good, for you know she has been living on her nerves—I had almost said, on the points of her nerves—for several years past—and everything depends on slowing down now. Do you not agree? Mr Stead may want to see me in London this summer and I ventured to ask him if he thought my presence

[Page 3]

absolutely necessary to bring and have an interview with Mr or Mrs Leggett and if either of them was satisfied that I ought to come, I would do so at once. What do you think of Mrs Okakura's book? A journalist friend gives me the reviews and some are very funny. One from the academy and literature especially. But I think it seems to be regarded

Unpublished Photograph of Sister Nivedita with Josephine MacLeod (Tantine)  
from the Family Album of Montagues: 1909.





give anything to have him for Viceroy. And spread this fact, if you can. If you should meet him

[Page 2]

do give *him* my book. And tell me what you like in it yourself. I am greedy for sympathy and discrimination.

If you have met Bratrine Sewell, I should be so grateful for something like a description of her mind and character.

I think the Blessed Sacrament and the Sacred Heart are the two devotions for which I care

[Page 3]

most. I see so clearly *that* it is by being united with the Heart of Swamiji that India will be saved, regardless of head and thought. Only this heart is not surrounded by thorns and crowned with flowers. It is *in* fire, burning and not consumed. And in the fire there may be the thorny crown. I was comparing one's strong attraction in personal directions once, with His far stronger personal love and yet complete

[Page 4]

universality and suddenly it seemed to me that I saw His heart poised like a world in the midst of streams of magnetic force like moonlight, that radiated North-South-East and West. It was only a symbol of course, but don't you think it was true?

Your chapel is dedicated to I know not what, but your own room is surely a Shrine of this Sacred Heart, the lifeblood of the Holy Grail.

[Page 5]

I wish you could know Mr Fame and Rev. Mother in Lloyd Square and also Miss Frances Williams, of the Lower School, Epson College. The last name is one who understands Swamiji's greatness and loves him personally. She was once a nun for a little while. But I suppose she is too far away for you to go and all.

Ever dearest Albert,

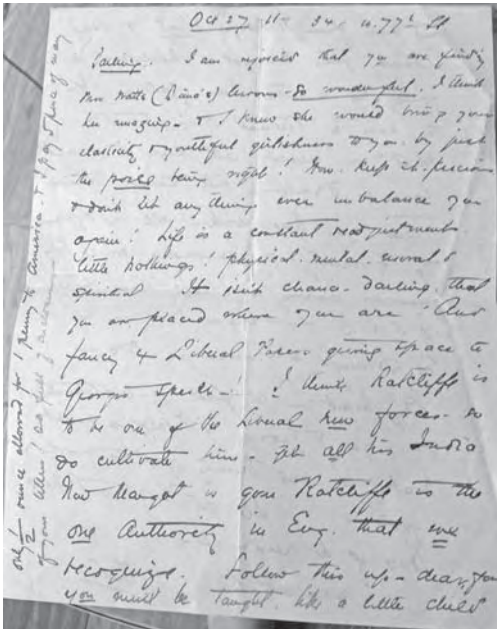
Most lovingly,

Margot.

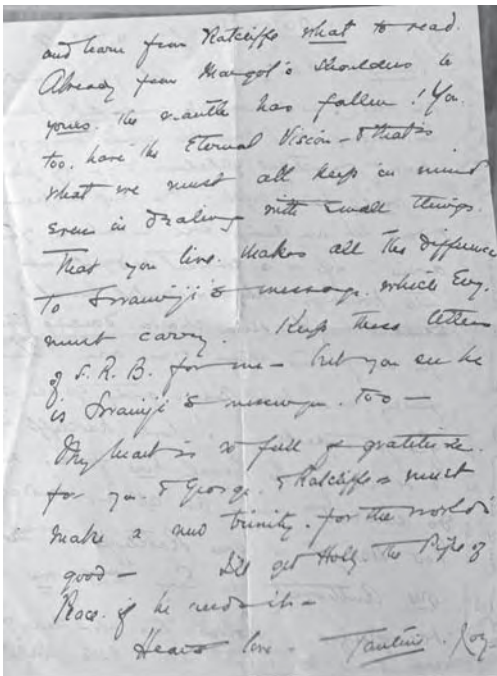
*Unpublished Photograph of Sister Nivedita along with Josephine MacLeod (Tantine), Alberta, Victor, and Francey from the Family Album of Montagues: 1909.*







Page 1



Pages 2

Unpublished Letters of Josephine Macleod to Alberta:  
Letter 1 Dated 27 October 1911.

## Josephine Macleod's Letters to Alberta

1

Oct 27, 11. 341 W, 77th Street.

Darling,

I am rejoiced that you are finding Mrs. Matt's (Diane's) lessons *so meaningful*. I think her amazing and I know she would bring your elasticity and youthful quippishness to you by just the *polish* being right! Now keep it precious and don't let anything ever imbalance you again! Life is a constant readjustment little nothings! Physical, mental, moral and spiritual. It isn't chance, darling, that you are placed where you are! And fancy 4 Liberal Pacers giving space to George's speech! I think Ratcliffe is to be one of the Liberal *new* forces. So do cultivate him. Get *all* his India. Now Margot is gone, Ratcliffe is the *one* authority in England that *we* recognize. Follow this up, dear, for *you* must be taught like a little child.

[Page 2]

and learn from Ratcliffe *what* to read. Already from Margot's shoulders to *yours*, the mantle has fallen! You too have the Eternal Vision—and that is what we must all keep in mind even in dealing with small things. That you live makes all the difference to Swamiji's message, which England must carry. Keep those letters of S.R.B. for me, but you see he is Swamiji's messenger too—My heart is so full of gratitude, for you and George and Ratcliffe must make a new trinity, for the world's good.

I'll get Holly the Pipe of Peace, if he needs it.

Heart's love,

Tantine.

[In the margin]

Only ½ ounce allowed for 1 penny to America. And I pay 5 pence of many of your letters! So full of enclosures.

2

341 W, 77th Street. Nov 3rd, 11.

Darling Bata,

The package of books for Mr. Benson—are Margot's gift to him. So keep them safely till sometime later. She wrote him a 3 sheet letter just before her last to me! On September 17th!

Today, a letter from Dr. Bose dated Darjeeling, October 10th says Margot is *gravely* ill and asking for our prayers! Do 3 days—she was yours. I am glad to know she was surrounded by love and the best of care (to famous Dr. Sir-car). Precious Child: She fought bravely and was killed *literally*, but not as she expected to be. The boomerangs we send out come back to us. How will we ever learn that *love* alone can heal and keep! We go to Holly on the 17th Nov. I think as Theodore will not be well till Xmas, when his boys come home for their holidays.

[Page 2]

I'd such *wonderful* letters from Mother about Margot's death. No one touches Mother's depth. Dodo is *far* from well. We see each other little, but she generally calls me up over the telephone for chats. She is gaining slowly. I want her to try my chiropractor but she's deep in legitimate method so bone-setters can get their chance. Kitty and I are feeling first rate and fine. Sending Swamiji's Mother too to be cured. If a little righting of the spine can do it, it's worth trying.

I'm so glad you are gaining all the time! My love to Hansbrooke. *Do* tell her to write one of anybodies and to Luisa, the dear, she wrote me once a dear letter.

Lovingly,  
J.M.

PB

341 W 77th St. Nov. 3rd 11.  
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Page 1

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Lovingly,  
J.M.

Pages 2

Unpublished Letters of Josephine Macleod to Alberta:  
Letter 2 Dated 03 November 1911.



## ***Sister Nivedita: A Light for and from the West***

**Jeffery D Long**

when non-Western cultures were seen as inferior and less developed than the civilisation of the West. In many ways, she is the ultimate counter-cultural figure.

I personally regard Sister Nivedita as a light both for and from the west. She was able to see beyond the limitations of her cultural background and upbringing in order to perceive and embrace the wisdom of the traditions of India. Her courage in the face of powerful resistance from the dominant social forces of her time is a model to all persons whose conscience draws them to points of view that are seen by the rest of society to be strange, exotic, or unconventional. She cared more about truth than social acceptance. In this sense, she is a light for the West.

She is also, however, a light from the West. Hers was a major voice in the wider movement to instill in the people of India pride in their ancient traditions after a long era of oppression under colonial rule. So dedicated was she to the people of India that she risked her relationship with the Ramakrishna Order in order to support the movement for India's political independence.

### ***From Margaret E Noble to Sister Nivedita***

Who was this remarkable woman, who was to become a light both for and from the western world? She was born on 28 October 1867, making her four years junior to her future guru,

### ***Introduction: An Inspirational Figure***

**S**ISTER NIVEDITA is an inspirational figure for a host of reasons. One may of course mention her dedication to such causes as the education of women, the independence of India from British colonial rule, and the dissemination of Vedantic wisdom. She is also a source of inspiration, however, simply by virtue of who she was: an independent-minded and courageous woman during a time when women were even more heavily oppressed by patriarchy than they are today, and a westerner who adopted a Hindu philosophy and way of life—even to the point of taking ascetic vows—at a time when most Westerners regarded the religions of India as ‘heathen’ paths leading to hellfire and damnation, and at a time

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Swami Vivekananda. Her birth name was Margaret Elizabeth Noble. She was born in what is now Northern Ireland, though all of Ireland, at that point in time, was, like India, under the rule of the British Empire. One suspects that her Irish background might have played a role in the ease with which she was able to sympathise with the cause of the people of India, in their struggle for freedom from the same imperial yoke. Indeed, her grandfather, who raised young Margaret after the death of her father, is known to have played a role in the Irish freedom movement. Although proudly Irish, it is interesting to note that Margaret's family were originally of Scottish ancestry, migrating to Ireland five centuries prior to her birth. The Scots, like the Irish, are a Celtic people, also known for having a strongly independent character. Think of William Wallace, also known as Braveheart, the Scottish freedom fighter of the middle ages, or even the recent referendum in the United Kingdom on Scottish independence. One must always be wary of cultural stereotyping, but Margaret Noble fits the stereotype of an independent Celtic woman in the decisions that she would make throughout her life.

Margaret lost her father when she was only ten years of age. This traumatic event occurring at such a tender age also certainly played a role in the forming of her character. The loss of a parent is difficult at any time in life, but especially if it happens before one has learned to navigate the world on one's own. In this, as with her Celtic heritage and embrace of Vedanta, I personally relate a great deal to Sister Nivedita. Losing my father at the age of twelve played a major role in my own spiritual journey.

Young Margaret Noble pursued her schooling in London, at Halifax College. She found that she had a great love both for learning and for teaching, and began to pursue a career as a

schoolteacher. A deeply religious young woman of the Christian faith, she did not find, despite her love for her teaching job, that her life was entirely fulfilled. She had questions that she did not find answered fully, either in the faith of her upbringing or in the scientific secular world view of the late nineteenth century.

London in the late 1880s and early 1890s was a fascinating place. The wealth of the royalty and nobility, as well as of the newly wealthy merchant class that was driving industrialisation, existed alongside desperate poverty and squalor. This was the Victorian era. It was the era of Charles Dickens—who had passed away in 1870, but whose writings well captured the entire period. It was also the period of the notorious Jack the Ripper, and of the fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes—the renowned brainchild of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle was, like Noble, a Celt—a Scotsman. Also like Noble, he was to be drawn to the philosophies of India, having a brief connection to the Theosophical Society and its founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Interest in India and in Indian thought was not unknown in Victorian London. Indeed, there were persons who were quite drawn to Indian culture, though this tended to be associated with the more eccentric and bohemian elements of London society. These were, of course, not the circles with which a young, devoutly Christian schoolteacher would tend to associate.

In November of 1895, however, when Noble was twenty-eight years of age, she had the opportunity to meet an actual Indian sage. Swamiji was in London at that time, on his way back to India from his first stay in America, where two years before he had addressed the first Parliament of the World's Religions.

Invited by a friend who knew of her interest in spiritual matters, Noble attended a lecture by Swamiji and found that he was able to answer all

of her questions. She was deeply impressed by him and attended as many of his lectures as she was able. She had already begun to read deeply about the philosophies of Asia and had a strong and quick grasp of everything that Swamiji had to teach. Buddhism in particular was a philosophy that attracted her interest—an interest that she and Swamiji shared in common.

Meeting Swamiji was to prove to be the most momentous event of Margaret Noble's life. She had felt in search of a 'calling'—a Christian term that refers to the purpose that God intends for each person to fulfil. The closest Hindu correlate to this idea of calling is *svadharma*: the particular destiny of each person, the purpose for which one is born into a particular lifetime, with its particular circumstances and attributes.

Years later, as Sister Nivedita, Noble wrote of her first meeting with Swamiji, in a letter to her friend Josephine Macleod dated 26 July 1904:

Suppose He had not come to London that time! Life would have been like a headless torso—for I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did. But if I had known more of life, I should perhaps have doubted whether when the time came I should certainly recognise. Fortunately, I knew little, and was spared that torture ... always I had this burning voice within, but nothing to utter. How often and often I sat down, pen in hand, to speak, and there was no speech. And now, there is no end to it! As surely I am fitted to my world—so surely is my world in need of me, waiting, ready. The arrow has found its own place in the bow. But *if* He had not come! If He had meditated on the Himalayan peaks.<sup>1</sup>

Sister Nivedita is here expressing not only that she found her *svadharma*—her 'calling'—in meeting Swamiji, but also her gratitude that Swamiji chose to travel to the west and to share Vedanta with the world.

In addition to their shared spiritual interests, Swamiji and Noble were both moved to profound compassion by the poverty and oppression experienced by the people of India. Swamiji felt that the women of India, in particular, were in deep need of upliftment, and that improving the conditions for women in India was a key to improving the conditions for all. He once wrote in a letter to an Indian friend, Haripada Mitra, on 28 December 1893: 'Can you better the condition of your women? Then there will be hope for your well-being. Otherwise you will remain as backward as you are now.'<sup>2</sup>

Given her passion for India, for helping others, and for education, as well as her experience as a schoolteacher in England, Swamiji asked Noble to join him in his effort to educate the people, especially the women, of India. Responding eagerly to his call, Noble set sail for India, arriving in Kolkata—then spelled Calcutta—on 28 January 1898.

Noble began a period of intensive training under Swamiji, learning ever more deeply about India's culture and philosophies. Two months after her arrival in India, on 25 March 1898, Swamiji initiated Noble formally into the religious life. On this date, she took her brahmacharya vows and was given the name Nivedita—one who has been given or dedicated to God. Margaret E Noble became Sister Nivedita.

### ***The Significance of Sister Nivedita's Brahmacharya Vows***

Sister Nivedita was among the first westerners, and was the first western woman, to be initiated formally into religious life by Swami Vivekananda. The world historical significance of this event cannot be underestimated. Such initiations of Westerners were the logical conclusion of Swamiji's understanding of Vedanta as a universal philosophy.

Prior to this time, however, at least in the modern period—for similar things may have happened in antiquity—membership in a Hindu religious order was restricted on the basis of considerations such as caste—*jati*. A non-Indian would be seen as a foreigner—a *mleccha*, or barbarian—and so as lacking the necessary authorisation, or *adhikara*, to take on such a role. Swamiji, in initiating Westerners, was essentially opening the Hindu tradition to membership from those not born into it. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, had previously opened the tradition to converts, but this was typically understood, in the nineteenth century, as ‘reconversion’ of Indians whose ancestors had been Hindu but had chosen to follow other spiritual paths at some point in the past. Swamiji did not see himself as converting his disciples to a Hindu tradition. He, in fact, distinguished between Vedanta as a universal philosophy and the various world religions, including Hinduism, as forms or manifestations of that universal

truth—though he did see the Vedas, as preserved in the Hindu tradition, as articulating the clearest and most complete understanding of that universal truth.<sup>3</sup> In initiating western disciples into the religious life, however, Swamiji set a precedent that was to be followed, in the twentieth century, by other Hindu spiritual teachers, such that western monks and nuns are now not a terribly uncommon sight in Hindu religious institutions.

### ***Brahmacharini, Teacher, and Revolutionary***

In November 1898, the same year that she took her brahmacharya vows, Sister Nivedita established the present Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls’ School. Part of Sister Nivedita’s and Swamiji’s shared vision of bringing education to the women of India, this school continues to run successfully to the present day.

In addition to Swamiji and other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, Sarada Devi, wife of Sri Ramakrishna, was

*Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls’ School*





present at the inauguration of this school. Sister Nivedita and the Holy Mother developed a very close relationship. The Holy Mother was so fond of Sister Nivedita that she referred to her in Bengali as *khuki*, which means ‘baby’ or ‘little girl.’ There is a photograph of these two amazing women, sitting next to one another. The affection between them is evident, as they are engaged in a deep and intimate conversation.

Beyond her founding of the girls’ school—which she administered for the rest of her life, and in which she also taught—Sister Nivedita extended the teaching portion of her calling to writing. She wrote a number of books in her relatively brief lifetime, including a major work on Swamiji called *The Master as I Saw Him*. She dedicated herself to studying and disseminating knowledge about Hindu traditions in such works as *The Web of Indian Life* and *Religion and Dharma*, as well as co-authoring, along with the famed Sri Lankan art historian and philosopher, Ananda K Coomaraswamy, a work titled *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*.<sup>4</sup>

Another of her scholarly works involved helping to compile the *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, to which she composed an introduction titled ‘Our Master and His Message’ on the fifth anniversary of his death, 4 July 1907. She regarded Swamiji’s teachings as ‘not only a gospel to the world at large,’ a universal message, ‘but also to its own children, the Charter of the Hindu Faith.’<sup>5</sup> Much has been written about the fact that what now goes by the name of Hinduism has, for most of history, consisted of a variety of *darshanas* and *sampradayas*—philosophical systems and systems of practice—that differ in many respects, but that are united in regarding the Vedas as a sacred revelation. After centuries of attacks and invasions, Swamiji came along as part of a wider movement of Hindu reform that helped lead to the coalescence of what is today

seen as a single Hindu tradition. In Sister Nivedita’s words, ‘What Hinduism needed, amidst the general disintegration of the modern era, was a rock where she could lie at anchor, an authoritative utterance in which she might recognise herself. And this was given to her, in these words and writings of the Swami Vivekananda’ (ibid.).

As is well known, Swamiji, Sister Nivedita’s teacher, friend, guide, and inspiration, passed away on 4 July 1902. Sister Nivedita weathered this loss in part by dedicating herself ever more fully to her work. She was keenly aware of the oppression of the people of India under British rule, and began to feel ever more deeply that her calling lay in the direction of working for Indian political independence.

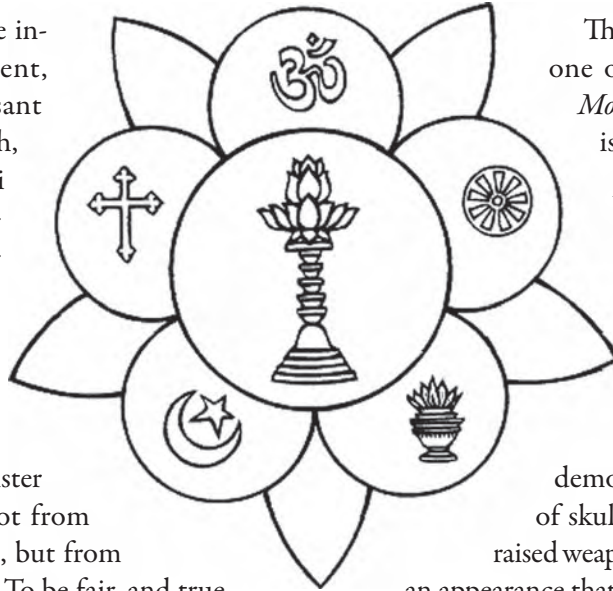
This placed Sister Nivedita in a difficult position with regard to the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. The Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission have, since inception, remained steadfastly apolitical. This is an important stance for several reasons. First, this twin-organisation is at the service of all of society. It would go deeply against the grain of Vedantic teaching were this organisation to be seen as partial to one person or community or another due to political opinion. For renunciators especially, to become involved in politics would be to become embroiled in worldly affairs. And in the period of British colonial rule, in particular, to take a public stance against this rule would endanger the service to which this organisation was dedicated. How could the monks feed the hungry, tend to the sick, and educate children if they were being jailed for sedition?

Sister Nivedita therefore had to take painful decision to distance herself from the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission in order to engage with the work of supporting Indian independence. In the course of this work, she became acquainted with a number of major

figures involved in the independence movement, including Annie Besant and Aurobindo Ghosh, later known as Sri Aurobindo. Her relations with Sri Aurobindo were especially close. Interestingly, Aurobindo himself was to pursue a path that could almost be seen as the reverse of Sister Nivedita's, moving not from spirituality to politics, but from politics to spirituality. To be fair, and true, to the lives of both of these figures, though, it must be noted that spirituality and politics can be entangled in a host of complex ways. For the karma yogi, whose worship is in the service of humanity, such service can manifest either as intense engagement in political activity, or an equally intense disengagement. As all who are familiar with Vedanta can attest, no single path is commended for every person or even for the same person at every phase of life. Each of us has our own *svadharma*.

### **Sister Nivedita and the Harmony of Religions**

A central tenet of Vedanta, as it has been taught by Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, is of course the harmony of religions—the idea that all religions can serve as valid paths to the realisation of humanity's potential divinity. Sri Ramakrishna famously embodied this teaching in his multi-religious sadhanas. Sister Nivedita, coming from a Christian background, did not see her embrace of Vedanta as a rejection of Christianity, but as a deepening and broadening of her spiritual horizons.



This is well illustrated in one of her works, *Kali the Mother*. The Goddess Kali is, of all Hindu deities, probably the one most difficult for many Christians to appreciate, as her iconography gives the impression, to one who is not knowledgeable of its meaning, of the demonic. With her garland of skulls, bloody tongue, and raised weapon, she does not present an appearance that most Christians would associate with divine benevolence. Yet she is the Divine Mother, appearing violently to protect Her children from evil, and to slay the enemy of egotism within all of us, symbolized by the severed head that she holds in one of her hands.

Sister Nivedita perceives, however, that the same divinity that presents Herself as the Divine Mother Kali also spoke through Jesus Christ. In 'The Story of Kali,' written to explain the Goddess to a child, Sister Nivedita writes of Divine Mother's *maya*, the game of 'hide-and-seek' that She plays by appearing in many forms and manifestations:

There is another game of hide-and-seek that the Great Mother plays. This is more like a fairy story. She hides sometimes in other people. She hides in anything. Any day you might see Her eyes, just looking into mother's, or playing with a kitten, or picking up a bird that had fallen from its nest. Under all these forms you may find God playing at hide-and-seek!


When there is something to do for someone—Kali is calling us to play. We love that play. She Herself said once (She was hiding in someone, and He said it for Her), 'Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these, My little

ones, ye did it unto Me.' Is not that like a fairy story! And what funny places She, the Great Mother, can hide in! Another time She said, 'Lift the stone, and thou shalt find Me. Cleave the wood, and there am I!' Did you ever lift a stone or break a piece of wood to see what was inside? Did you ever think *that* was God at the heart of things? How beautifully Kali plays! You might find Her *anywhere*!<sup>6</sup>

A number of important Vedantic themes, in fact, can be discerned in these deceptively simple words. There is the omnipresence of divinity—*sarvam khalvidam brahma*—for the Divine Mother is everywhere, in everything and everyone. We are to serve God in all beings: 'When there is something to do for someone—Kali is calling us to play.' And of course, in the words of Jesus, whatever we do others, we do to Him. This is the basis of Vedantic ethics, as understood by Swami Vivekananda. God dwells in all beings. We are therefore enjoined to serve all beings as God.

### Conclusion

Sister Nivedita, like her guru, Swamiji, dwelt on earth for an all too brief time. She left her body on 13 October 1911, at the age of forty-three. During her short time, though—and

even more in the period of just over a century that has passed—her influence has been tremendous. Not only has she touched the lives of the multitudes of young women who have studied at the school that she established, but she has also been an inspiration to spiritual seekers everywhere. A light for and from the west, she is a role model for western seekers who aspire to realise the truths of Vedanta in their lives, as well as an inspiration to Indians, who continue to marvel at the devotion this Irish woman had for India's cultural heritage, its ancient wisdom, and its people. 

### Notes and References

1. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1982), 2.661.
2. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 5.26.
3. See Swami Vivekananda, "Hinduism and Shri Ramakrishna", *Complete Works*, 6.181–6.
4. On another personal note, this book, also illustrated by Abanindranath Tagore, was one of the first books that I read as I embarked on my journey to Vedanta in my youth.
5. *Complete Works*, 1.ix.
6. Sister Nivedita, *Kali the Mother* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2014), 108–9.

*Sister Nivedita Girls' School, Kolkata.*





# Sister Nivedita

Dr Aparna Basu

SHE WORE A FULL WHITE GOWN covering her from neck to feet and had a rosary of *Rudraksha* beads round her neck. She was as it were, an image of a *Tapasvini* carved out of white marble.<sup>1</sup> This was how Abanindranath Tagore described Sister Nivedita when he first met her in Calcutta at the house of the American Consul at a Reception for Kokuzo Okakura. The second time he saw her at a party of the Art Society at Justice Homewood's house, 'When she came and stood there it seemed as if the moon had arisen among the stars. In a moment all the beautiful women paled into insignificance' (ibid.).

Nivedita, whose original name was Margaret Noble was born in Dungannon in Ireland on 28 October 1867. Her grandfather John Noble was a minister of the Wesleyan Church. Her father was also deeply religious and though he died when Margaret was only ten years old, he had made a deep impression on her. She was educated at Halifax College where she developed an interest in music, art, and the natural sciences. After passing her final examination at the age of seventeen, she started teaching at a school. She moved to a school in London where she came to know some of the most learned and influential people, among them Lady Ripon and Lady Isabel Margesson. They had formed a small literary group which came to be known as Sesame Club. Margaret became an enthusiastic member of this

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club where she heard speakers like George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Huxley.

It was at Lady Margesson's West End drawing room that Margaret first met Swami Vivekananda who had stopped in London on his way to the US. Margaret was not immediately convinced by all that Swamiji said but she slowly started thinking about it. On his return journey,

Vivekananda once again stopped in London and held classes on *Jnana Yoga* and gave some public lectures. He also held question and answer classes. Margaret attended all these and asked many questions to clear her doubts. She was gradually convinced that she had found her guru in Swamiji and she wanted to go to India to serve him. Swamiji told her that he had plans for the women of India in which she could be of great help to him. He realised that Margaret was sincere and wanted to dedicate her life to the service of Indian women. He believed that she had a great future in India because India wanted a woman like her. 'Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted.'<sup>2</sup> But he warned her of the difficulties she would face—the poverty, misery, superstition, heat, and dust. He asked her to consider all this carefully before making up her mind. He realised that it was Margaret's love and devotion for him which was making her come to India but he had to tell her that he had to remain impersonal and if she was coming it was to serve the country and the cause of Truth. But he assured her that he would stand by her till his death.

On 28 January 1898, Margaret arrived in Calcutta. Swamiji was at the docks to receive her. The inaugural meeting of the Ramakrishna Mission was held in Star Theatre on March 11. Presiding over the meeting, Swamiji introduced Margaret by saying: 'Already England has given us some of her great intellects to help us in our mission ... And now England has sent us another gift in Miss Margaret Noble, from whom we expect much'(35).

March 25 was a special day as on that day at Belur math Margaret was being consecrated. Swamiji went to Margaret's house in the morning and took her to the chapel in the *Math*. He taught her to perform the worship of Shiva and then she

was initiated into brahmacharya and given the name Nivedita which means 'the dedicated'.

The cause of women was uppermost in Swamiji's mind. He believed that without the uplift of women, India could not make any real progress. Education was the most important agent of change and he, therefore, wanted Nivedita to work for women's education. She started a school for girls with very limited financial resources and faced many difficulties but despite all this she carried on. She had to give up the rented accommodation and shifted the school to her own house. She was an excellent teacher and her history classes were most interesting. She told the girls stories about the Rajputs, about Rana Pratap and Padmini. She would have loved to take her students on historical trips but could not do so because she had very little money. However, she took them on trips to the zoo, the museum, by boat to Dakshineswar, and so on. She told the girls that they were daughters of India. *She* made them sing *Vande Mataram* when the government had prohibited its singing and took them to hear speeches on Swadeshi.

Swamiji's death was one of the saddest events in Nivedita's life. She sat by him and fanned his body till it was brought down. As she stood by the funeral pyre, she saw a cloth covering him and she asked Swami Saradananda, 'Is *this* going to be burnt? It is the last thing I ever saw Him wear' (140). He asked her if she would like to have it but she felt that it may not be proper. And then from the burning pyre a small piece of that same cloth was blown and landed near her feet. She picked it up and treasured it as a sacred relic.

After Swamiji's death, Nivedita faced a grave problem. She was getting more and more interested in politics but as a monastic member of the Order she was obliged to give up her political association. She felt that it was her duty

to work for the nation, that unless India became free from alien rule no problem could be solved. After a great deal of inner debate, she finally decided to leave the Order. Her faith in Sri Ramakrishna, the Holy Mother, and Swamiji, however, remained as strong as ever.

Swamiji loved India. Nivedita said that 'the thought of India was to him like the air he breathed' (201). 'What we want', said Swamiji, 'is strength, so believe in yourselves. We have become weak ... Make your nerves strong. What we want is muscles of iron and nerves of steel. ... It is man-making religion that we want. It is man-making theories that we want. It is man-making education all round that we want' (ibid.).

This idealism of Swamiji inspired Nivedita. She wanted to do something for the country. Swamiji's man-making became for Nivedita nation-making. Though Swamiji never spoke of nation or nationalism, these became the focus of her speaking and writing.

From the closing years of the nineteenth century, the Government in India became concerned about the rise of nationalist sentiments. Lord Curzon's University Reform Bill and Partition of Bengal in 1905 led to growing anti-British feelings especially in Bengal. Nivedita could not remain aloof from this unrest. She opposed the Universities Commission writing that it had tried to 'kill all education, and especially all science education'.<sup>3</sup> She criticised the Universities Bill as an attempt to narrow the sphere of education. She was furious when Curzon in his Convocation Address said that the ideal of truth was to a large extent a Western concept and that it occupied a higher place in the moral code of the West than of the East. Nivedita wrote a letter to the editor in the *Statesman* stating that the second chapter of Max Muller's book *What India Has to Teach Us*, was entitled 'The Truthful Character of the Hindus'.<sup>4</sup>

The young men of Bengal formed associations such as the Dawn Society, the Anushilan Samiti, The Gita Society, and the Young Men's Hindu Union for mobilising the youth for national work. Nivedita went and addressed these societies and explained the message of Vivekananda and the Bhagavadgita.

17 Bosepara Lane, 'The House of Sisters' where Nivedita lived was a meeting place for writers, artists, scientists, teachers, journalists, members of the Ramakrishna Mission, politicians, and visiting scholars. S K Ratcliffe, the editor of *Statesman* wrote in his obituary of Nivedita, how he and his wife cycled down from Chowringhee on Sunday mornings for breakfast. The breakfast was simple but the conversation always lively and stimulating. 'Her house was a wonderful rendezvous ... nowhere else ... was there an opportunity of making acquaintance

Swami Saradananda (1865–1927)





with so many interesting types of the Indian world' (238). Among those who visited regularly were Jagadish Chandra Bose and his wife Abala, who became Nivedita's closest friends. Nivedita helped him in writing many books and also financially for their publication. From 1902 she spent every holiday with the Boses either in India or abroad. In his will Dr Bose left one lakh rupees for a memorial in Nivedita's name. Abala Bose spent it in building the Nivedita Hall in a women's welfare institution, *Bani Bhavan*.

Rabindranath Tagore was most impressed by Nivedita's love for India. He often visited her in Bosepara Lane and went with her to Bodh Gaya. Nivedita learnt enough Bengali to translate '*Kabuliwala*' into English.

Most of Nivedita's friends were men. An exception was Saraladevi Ghoshal, a niece of Rabindranath, a remarkably powerful woman who defied many social norms. She was a graduate who had studied science despite many odds. She wanted to be economically independent and took up a teaching job in Mysore. She married when she was over thirty, unusual for a Hindu woman in those days, to a man who was from Punjab and of another caste. She edited *Bharati*, the first women's magazine in India, founded by her mother Swarnakumari Devi. Sarala Devi was active in the Swadeshi movement and like Nivedita, addressed societies such as the Anushilan Samiti and inspired young revolutionaries.

Despite their differences on many subjects, including their views of the *Brahmo Samaj*, Bipin Chandra Pal visited her and she was a contributor to his weekly *New India*. Similarly Ramananda Chatterjee was also a *Brahmo* but Nivedita was full of praise for his Bengali magazine *Prabasi* and when *Modern Review* was published, she contributed articles to it. Jagadish Chandra Bose introduced her to Ramananda Chatterjee. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the eminent

historian, also called on her frequently. Among some of the other prominent men who came in close touch with her were Sir Gurudas Banerjee, Sir Rashbehari Ghosh, Brajendranath Seal, P C Ray, Aswini Kumar Dutta, Dr Nilratan Sarkar, Sir Taraknath Palit, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Surendranath Banerjee, and several others.

Young revolutionaries like Bhupendranath Datta—brother of Vivekananda, Barin Ghosh—brother of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, and Taraknath Das regarded her as their guru and received financial help from her. Taraknath Das dedicated his book *Japan and India* to Nivedita. While she admired the courage and patriotism of these young men, she did not advocate acts of violence or terrorism.

Among Nivedita's many interests was Indian art. She played a part in the revival of the Ajanta style of paintings as well as of Rajput and Mughal miniatures. She believed that rebirth of art was necessary for the remaking of the nation. Swami Vivekananda, in a lecture in Paris, had taken issue with the Western Orientalists' view that Indian art was influenced by the Greeks. Nivedita was convinced by his arguments and became a critic of the theory of Hellenic influence on Indian art.

E B Havell, Principal of the Calcutta School of Art and an authority on Indian art, supported Nivedita's view. So did Ananda Coomaraswamy, another distinguished art critic and authority on Indian art and Okakura, the introduction to whose book *Ideals of the East* was written by Nivedita.

Nivedita found that the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore, Vice Principal of the Calcutta School of Art, were influenced by foreign ideas. She had long conversations with him and she was influential in changing his views. When he painted *Bharat Mata*—India the Mother—in 1908, Nivedita was overjoyed. She got this as well as other paintings of his printed in *Modern Review* and wrote critical notes on them.

Abanindranath gathered round him students like Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar, and Surendranath Ganguly and a new school of art developed called the Calcutta School of Art. All these young artists were influenced by Nivedita and she took a great deal of interest and pride in their work.

Nivedita was also interested in Western art, mostly religious. She got paintings by Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, and others printed in *Modern Review* with comments which were translated by Ramananda Chatterjee into Bengali and published in *Prabasi*.

Nivedita became known to a wider public through her books. *Kali the Mother* was her first book to be published. Swami Brahmananda asked Nivedita to write a biography of Swamiji. She tried but felt that she was not capable of doing so. She, therefore, decided to write her own impressions in—*The Master as I Saw Him*. In *Notes of Some Wanderings with Swami Vivekananda* she describes her journey with Swamiji in Almora and Kashmir. It is in the form of a diary where Swamiji's impressions and thoughts are jotted down. She also wrote about her travels to Badrinath and Kedarnath. She was the author of *Siva and Buddha, An Indian Study of Love and Death*, *The Web of Indian Life*, and many other books and articles.

Sister Nivedita was a many-splendoured personality. One feels tempted to embrace the clichéd representation of her as a 'Renaissance' figure. A deeply spiritual person, she dedicated her life to the service of India and tried to fulfil Swamiji's unfinished dream. She worked for the education of Indian women. She was interested in art and literature and left her imprint on the intellectual, political, and cultural life of India. She passed away in Darjeeling on 13 October 1911. Her simple memorial only says 'Here Reposes Sister Nivedita Who Gave Her All To India' (294).



## References

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2. Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1999), 29.
3. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1982), 2.540.
4. *Sister Nivedita*, 188.

'Bharat Mata', Abanindranath Tagore





*Margaret Noble, Aged Seventeen; Photograph Taken on 27 June 1884*

## ***The 'Irishness' of Margaret Noble/Sister Nivedita***

**Gwilym Beckerlegge**

**T**HE QUESTION OF what made Sister Nivedita, born Margaret Noble,<sup>1</sup> take the dramatic step of abandoning her life and career in London to follow a Hindu guru to India is a

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fascinating one. Such a course of action would still be uncommon today, but for a woman of the late nineteenth century, and a single woman at that some might be inclined to point primarily, maybe even exclusively, to the impact of Swami Vivekananda and his message on Nivedita. Others might look to Nivedita's personal qualities, her temperament, her intellect, or more general psychological



factors. With access to primary sources, not least Nivedita's own writings, and many relevant secondary sources ranging from extended biographies to shorter appreciations, an inquiry of this kind lies within the scope of historical inquiry.

### Approaches to Nivedita

The three most widely-known biographies of Nivedita are probably *The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita* by Lizelle Reymond (1953) who had a long-standing interest in Indian spirituality and worked with the Ramakrishna Mission in Kolkata to offer relief to refugees after Partition in 1947, *Sister Nivedita* by Pravrajika Atmaprana (1961) of the Sri Sarada Math, and *Long Journey Home* by Barbara Foxe (1975), a member of what was then the London Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre.

Reymond's study was originally published in French in 1945 as *Nivédita de L'Inde*<sup>2</sup> before being published in English in 1953, and was thus prepared and published during the build-up to Indian Independence. Reymond<sup>3</sup> was given access to Nivedita's letters and drew upon information provided by Nivedita's sister and brother—May and Richmond, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, and others who had known Nivedita. Reymond's efforts in collecting together letters and other material relating to Nivedita's life were later acknowledged by Sankari Prasad Basu who dedicated his *Letters of Sister Nivedita* to Reymond, and Srimat Anirvan.<sup>4</sup> The three biographers cited above had all completed their work before a large part of Nivedita's correspondence had been brought together. Nivedita's letters, however, are largely correspondence with other intimates of Swamiji and tend to be in the style of affectionate newsletters, sometimes with quite sharp assessments of the characters of mutual acquaintances. They are invaluable for providing insights into the birth of the new movement, but do not provide much systematic

exposition of Nivedita's ideas or detail about her early life and family, although they include current references to her sister and brother. They do reflect Nivedita's exchanges with major Indian personalities of her day in a number of fields.

Pravrajika Atmaprana stated that her study was largely based on the biography produced in Bengali by Pravrajika Muktiprana in 1959, and was intended to correct recently published biographies in English and Bengali. Pravrajika Atmaprana identified Nivedita's own works as the major source, together with references made to Nivedita by her contemporaries. Reymond's study appears in the bibliography, but it is not clear whether this was one of the studies that Pravrajika Atmaprana sought to correct. Barbara Foxe acknowledged Pravrajika Atmaprana's study as an important source, together with Nivedita's writings. Foxe also gained access to extracts of letters from Josephine MacLeod, to family memories of Nivedita, and to letters of Sister Christine, Christine Greenstidel, who taught with Nivedita in Calcutta. Foxe makes no mention of Reymond's biography as such. Neither Pravrajika Atmaprana nor Barbara Foxe include the same level of detail about Nivedita's early years prior to her meeting with Vivekananda as Lizelle Reymond, nor do they significantly add to that detail. As we shall see, however, there are reasons why it is quite difficult to determine the sources of information relating to several of the episodes recounted by Reymond and so to test the reliability of the account of Nivedita's early life.

It is important to begin with some consideration of the sources that Nivedita's biographers have used because perhaps inevitably we have limited access to the early years of a young girl in nineteenth-century Ireland whose destiny could not then have been foreseen and thus encouraged closer and more systematic scrutiny and chronicling of her early life at that time.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, biographers have been able to shed only limited light on Nivedita's early years, relying largely on family reminiscences, before she came to fame in the years after meeting Swamiji in 1895. Biographies written by those close to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda-Sarada Devi tradition understandably concentrate on the relationship between Nivedita and Swamiji and what brought Nivedita to the point of acknowledging Swamiji as her Master and then following him to serve in India. Yet, all her biographers have been obliged to examine Nivedita's early years to an extent in order to offer some explanation of how she came to remake her life in India under Swamiji's guidance.

The limited nature of the sources open to the historian and the diminishing likelihood of finding new sources, especially now that a substantial number of Nivedita's letters have been published in one collection, might explain why recent scholars unattached to the Ramakrishna tradition, broadly understood, have not committed themselves to producing full biographies of Nivedita. Also, they would not be able to count on the access granted by Nivedita's family members and intimates to biographers with links to the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and Sri Sarada Math. Instead, drawing on the biographies cited above, external authors have tended to interpret Nivedita's chosen path within a wider context of the changing lives of late nineteenth-century women and in the light of postcolonial scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

The authors of the most extended biographies of Nivedita<sup>7</sup> have tended to focus on three elements in her early life as preparing her for her future, and then unseen, life in India. These are the religious influences that acted on her and how she reacted to these, her own education and experiences as a teacher, and her Irish origins and the influence of her family on her future political views. I have identified the three separately

at this stage in the interests of clarity. In reality, of course, these substantially overlapped, not least because Ireland was where Nivedita spent the early part of her life. Consequently, in the ensuing discussion, although introduced separately, these influences will emerge as interrelated and interpenetrating. I shall discuss formative religious and educational influences in the next section, and then devote the remainder of the article to a consideration of Nivedita's 'Irishness'.

### ***Nivedita as a 'Seeker'***

Nivedita lived during a period marked by the considerable socio-economic impacts of accelerating industrialisation in Britain and British colonialism, which for all its constraints also gave rise to new expectations in some women in Britain. As Maina Singh observes, colonial India gave many white women of middle-class backgrounds opportunities for 'self-fulfilment, prestige and public visibility difficult to imagine in the England of their day'.<sup>8</sup> In the field of religion, this was an era in which new movements developed under the leadership of women, for example, Christian Science and Theosophy, described by Harold W French as 'way stations between participation in the institutional Church and an identification with Vedanta',<sup>9</sup> as were New England Transcendentalism and New Thought in the United States.

Pravrajika Atmaprana has referred to Nivedita as 'a seeker after Truth'.<sup>10</sup> An early formative influence within her family-life was that of Wesleyan Methodist Christianity. Samuel Noble, her father, was a Wesleyan minister like his father before him. Nivedita also learnt the Bible from her maternal grandmother to whom she was devoted, but her relationship with her mother, Mary Noble, was more strained. Both Reymond and Foxe depict<sup>11</sup> Mary Noble as a woman of rigidly dogmatic religious convictions.

Her attempts to impart her brand of Christianity to her children, it is implied, was resisted by Nivedita and became a cause of friction between mother and daughter.

While at school, Nivedita was exposed to the beliefs of a headmistress who, according to Raymond<sup>12</sup> was a member of the relatively recently formed Plymouth Brethren, but in her mid-teens was drawn to the Tractarian Movement, which valued the Catholic inheritance of the Anglican Church and continuity with it. Thus, by the time she took up her first teaching post at a private school at Keswick in England's Lake District in 1884, Nivedita had become strongly attracted to High Anglicanism. She was then, depending on when she took up the post, either in her eighteenth year or eighteen years of age and is said to have considered conversion to Roman Catholicism and entering a convent (21–2). That was quite a spiritual journey to make from the Non-conformism of her family and her own schooling, but it was far from ended.<sup>13</sup> Having moved to another post in Wrexham in North Wales, Nivedita was introduced there to the ideas of John Ruskin and the New England Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.<sup>14</sup> It is very likely that, through Emerson and Thoreau, she would have had some encounter with Hindu thought, if she had not met this previously. Nivedita referred to being in a 'wavering state of mind' for about seven years from the age of eighteen, which was somewhat eased through the study of the natural sciences and Buddhism until Swamiji finally provided the 'relief my doubting spirit had been longing for'.<sup>15</sup>

In London, we are told Nivedita also allied herself to the liberal Broad Church wing of the Anglican Church but remained spiritually unsatisfied.<sup>16</sup> Even in later life, Nivedita repeatedly affirmed that she remained a Christian and a member of the Anglican Church. For example,

in 1900 she stated that 'It is wholly a mistake to suppose that I have renounced either my nationality or my religion in becoming a sister of the order. Christianity is the nursery in which my spiritual thought was trained.'<sup>17</sup> In an interview in 1902 she declared 'I have never broken with my position as a member of the Church of England nor is there any reason why I should do so'.<sup>18</sup> She was able to maintain this position through the use of the distinction between 'the truth' of Christianity, to which she was committed, and the 'preachings' of Christianity of which she was critical.<sup>19</sup> She also employed the notion of *ishta*, 'chosen' path, when discussing the Christianity of other Vedantins.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than characterising Nivedita in isolation as a 'seeker', we can go further down the explanatory path by considering her as an example of a number of prominent women of the late nineteenth century who, in resisting the gender roles society imposed on them at that time, distanced themselves from the institutionalised Christianity of the churches. Significantly, many of these women fell within the categories of 'serial seekers'—those who have changed their spiritual path more than once and sequentially over a lifetime—or 'multiple seekers'—those who have rejected closure of any kind and who are typically engaged in consolidating and endlessly refining their spiritual paths.<sup>21</sup> For many of these individuals, 'seeking' itself had value as part of their quest, and they were prepared to take from different teachers and then to move on.

When I first began to explore the growth of the London Vedanta circle in the late 1890s, I became more aware of what this revealed not just about Swamiji's legacy but also about the rapidly changing religious scene in England at that time. I was fascinated by common themes in the accounts of why his followers in both London and the US, many of whom like Nivedita had been



'serial seekers' or would prove to be 'multiple seekers', had been attracted to Swamiji and Vedanta.<sup>22</sup> Just as Nivedita was exposed to Transcendentalist philosophy, so were several of the Americans, for example, Katherine Sanborne, who were receptive to Swamiji's message in Chicago. Many of Nivedita's recollections of what drew her to Vivekananda and his message find parallels in the memoirs of other early Vedantins on each side of the Atlantic.<sup>23</sup> Different patterns of 'seeking' help to explain why several of Swamiji's early admirers in both London and the United States were drawn to different aspects of his message without necessarily intending to commit to his teaching as a whole or to accept him exclusively as their teacher. For some followers in London, their prior allegiances to causes such as temperance, spiritualism, and Christian Science healing, took priority over Swamiji's plans for India. This in turn helps to explain the degree of fluidity and at times instability in the groups that Swamiji attracted in New York and London.<sup>24</sup>

What initially surprised me was the ways in which these early admirers of Swamiji took quite different positions in relation to the India-dimension of his mission.<sup>25</sup> Nivedita was foremost among those who were powerfully drawn to Swamiji's interpretation of Hindu tradition and his vision for India, as well as his universalism. Along with others who had previously been 'serial seekers', such as the Seiers and Christine Greenstidel—Sister Christine, Margaret Noble remade her life in India as Sister Nivedita. Even before the end of Vivekananda's first visit to Britain, Nivedita, the 'serial seeker', had resolved to address him as 'Master'<sup>26</sup>, although she admitted how little she knew of him at that time (1.17). Before long she had resolved that she would work in India. She arrived in India in early 1898 and within a few months was initiated as a brahmacharini by Swamiji when she received the name Nivedita.<sup>27</sup>

What was it that made Nivedita take such a life-changing decision to devote the remainder of her life to the service of India, when the overwhelming majority of Swamiji's early, close followers in the United States and London did not feel called to respond in this way? Part of the answer to this question, I would suggest, is that, although Nivedita continued to identify herself as an Anglican Christian, she was more critical of the Christianity she knew and the society in which she lived than many other early Vedantins. Although grateful to Swamiji for his teaching, which they received as enriching their own universalist understanding of Christianity, they saw no reason either to move away from the religious tradition into which they were born or to move to India. Nivedita's biographers have suggested that her intellectual independence had been strengthened by her reaction against the 'stifling idiocy of the formal Victorian education'<sup>28</sup> she had received, and by having had to take on considerable responsibility when relatively young after the death of her father, a quality that she later found society in general did not value in women and thus did not encourage (14).

Nivedita referred to herself and some of the others who heard Swamiji in London as 'not very orthodox, or open to belief'.<sup>29</sup> In fact according to Nivedita, some who first went to hear Swamiji were there 'on the very score of our unwillingness to believe, for the difficulty in convincing us of the credibility of religious propaganda in general' (ibid.). In 1897, she wrote of an air of 'growing uncertainty and despair, with regard to Religion' and of the impossibility of retaining 'belief in the dogmas of Christianity', leading people to look for truth elsewhere (2.389). But she also noted that not all had shared the resulting 'spirit of doubt and negation'. Some had shown 'a readiness to get truth from whatever quarter of the horizon it may hail' (2.390). She was, to use

Emerson's description of her counterparts in the US, part of a 'whole generation of gentlemen and ladies out in search of religions', after their disillusionment with the 'stern old faiths'.<sup>30</sup> This same hint of spiritual adventurousness is present in Nivedita's comment on the responses of different members of Swamiji's audience to his message: 'The doctrine that while no religion was true in the way commonly claimed, yet all were equally true in a very real way, was one that commanded the immediate assent of *some* of us,'<sup>31</sup> implying that not all were as open as she was to Swamiji's style of religious universalism.

After Swamiji's death, Nivedita severed her formal links with the Ramakrishna Math and Mission so that she could actively promote the cause of Indian independence.<sup>32</sup> Her service to the nation was recognised on the centenary of her death by the issue of a commemorative Indian postal stamp. Thus, again distinctively among Swamiji's intimate disciples, Nivedita brought a commitment to both *political* and social activism as well as pursuing the spiritual

path she had found in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji. In many accounts of Nivedita's life, it is suggested that her Irish roots, her 'Irishness', were the major influence that prepared her to hear Swamiji's message and act on it in the way that she did.

### The 'Irishness' of Nivedita

Lizelle Reymond refers to conditions in Ireland around the year 1825 when the country was 'in the grip of a merciless guerrilla struggle'<sup>33</sup> and marred by conflicts between Roman Catholics and Protestants, while 'at the same time the tides of revolution against the English crown grew more thunderous and menacing' (ibid.). Pravrajika Atmaprana speaks of Nivedita imbibing her maternal grandfather's 'spirit of freedom and love for Ireland'.<sup>34</sup> Pravrajika Atmaprana frames her comments on Nivedita's early life within the context of a 'mighty upsurge for freedom' (1) in nineteenth-century Ireland, which saw the emergence of the Feinian national militia, presumably the Irish Republican Brotherhood, known as the

Mrs Charlotte and Mr J H Sevier



Feinian Brotherhood in the United States, that came into being in the 1850s, the Home Rule movement—which grew throughout the 19th century—the Land League, founded in 1879, and growing popular agitation. Barbara Foxe acknowledges as one of ‘the contradictions in her [Nivedita] nature’<sup>35</sup> that, although born in Ireland, Nivedita always spoke of herself as an Englishwoman. Yet, Foxe too rehearses the history of Nivedita’s family, asserting that her grandparents were ‘enthusiastic supporters of the agitation for Home Rule’ (ibid.) and that both her parents were ‘reared on stories of the heroism of Irish patriots fighting for Home Rule’ (13). Thus it does not come entirely as a surprise when we are told that ‘the fiery Irish nature which she [Nivedita] had inherited was already well nourished by their [her relatives] stories of the fight for nationalism’ (ibid.). In a similar vein, Foxe writes of another contradiction in Nivedita’s character, namely, that her sweetness of nature, spoken of by those who knew her, went side by side with ‘the Irish fighting spirit which grew stronger with passing years’ (14). This image of Nivedita’s ‘Irishness’ has permeated beyond the literature of the Ramakrishna Movement.

In my entry on Sister Nivedita in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*,<sup>36</sup> I tentatively voiced some reservations concerning broad claims made about the significance of Nivedita’s ‘Irishness’ in shaping her decision to follow Swamiji and to dedicate the remainder of her life to working for India. At the very least, there are problems in attempting to characterise an individual by referring to traits rooted in what is presented as a ‘national’ temperament. I have long intended to return to the question of whether Nivedita’s early years in Ireland had a bearing on her later commitment to Swamiji and India. What follows are some fuller but still preliminary thoughts about Nivedita’s ‘Irishness’

and what light it might shed on her transformation from Margaret Noble to Swamiji’s disciple, Sister Nivedita.

When we examine Nivedita’s personal, direct experience of Ireland, we find that Nivedita actually spent relatively little time in Ireland and most of this was when she was very young. She moved from Ireland to England at four years of age. Born Margaret Noble to Irish parents, Samuel and Mary, in Dungannon, County Tyrone, in 1867, Nivedita’s paternal family had Scottish roots, although long settled in Ireland. Biographies frequently include the claim that her paternal grandfather, John Noble who was a Wesleyan minister, was sympathetic to the plight of Roman Catholics in Ireland, although prior to that her family seemingly had been hostile to Catholics, and that her father and her maternal grandfather—family name Hamilton—participated in the Irish Home Rule movement. In Reymond’s<sup>37</sup> account, John Noble is presented as being of national standing, ‘fighting’ relentlessly in common cause with Catholics against the pro-English Church of Ireland. Reymond’s choice of the term ‘fighting’ could have been intended to imply non-violent political action, but set in a paragraph where mention is made of bombs being thrown, patriots’ meeting being broken up, and patriots being hanged, it rather suggests his involvement in a militant armed struggle.

Nivedita’s father left Ireland for England when she was not yet one year of age in order to train for the Wesleyan ministry. Once he was ordained he was given a church in Oldham, a town not far from the city of Manchester. Nivedita, who had been left in Ireland with her maternal grandmother to whom she was devoted, rejoined her parents in Oldham. There she saw her three-year old sister, May, for the first time. By then Nivedita was four years of age, suggesting that this relocation from Ireland to the North of England



took place around 1871. By 1876—less than ten years after her birth—Nivedita and her family had moved again, this time to the kinder climate of Torrington in Devon for sake of her father's health. Her brother Richmond was born there.<sup>38</sup> It was also there that her father died at the age of thirty-four when Nivedita was ten years of age or so after October 1877, the month of Nivedita's tenth birthday (*ibid.*).

At this point, the chronology provided in the three biographies is uncertain. This element of uncertainty about how long Nivedita remained in Ireland on this occasion is relevant to our current discussion of the nature and depth of Nivedita's experience of Ireland. For this reason, I need to make what might first appear to be a substantial digression. What I believe to be formerly little-known information about Nivedita's schooling, which I came across during the preparation of this article, allows us to talk with greater certainty about the length of time Nivedita spent in Ireland *after* her father's death.

According to Nivedita's biographers, the *Orphanage and School at Halifax*

decision to educate the sisters in England at 'Halifax College', which was run by 'the Chapter of the Congregationalist Church',<sup>39</sup> was a result of a family conference after the death of their father led by the girls' maternal grandfather, implying that the family had returned to Ireland. Pravrajika Atmaprana<sup>40</sup> states that, on the death of her husband, Mary Noble 'lost heart' and returned with her three children to her father's home in Ireland. The biographers, however, do not give a precise or consistent indication of when the two girls returned to England and thus how long they stayed in Ireland. According to Reymond, the decision about the girls' schooling was taken 'a few days later'<sup>41</sup> after the death of Nivedita's father. Pravrajika Atmaprana states that it was taken in 'due time'<sup>42</sup> after the family's return to Ireland, and Foxe<sup>43</sup> appears to echo this. As we know, the girls' father and paternal grandfather had been Wesleyan Methodist ministers. Although Wesleyan Methodism is distinct from Congregationalism, both are Nonconformist denominations.

In fact, the institution that Nivedita joined



was the Crossley Heath School in Halifax, Yorkshire.<sup>44</sup> Information provided by this school from its archive, which I believe has not appeared in any previous study of Nivedita, clearly confirms that this was Nivedita's school and refers to two headmistresses named in biographies of Nivedita but as being on the staff of 'Halifax College'. In 1912 the school magazine, *The Crossleyan*, paid tribute

to Nivedita after her death, and the School commemorates her today as a famous former pupil.<sup>45</sup>

The original Heath Grammar School was a sixteenth-century foundation. The Crossley Heath school building was founded through the generosity of the Crossley brothers—Joseph, Francis, and John—who had made their fortunes in the carpet business. They were

*The List of Students at the Crossley Heath School, Savile Park, Halifax*

A List of the Girls who have passed through the School—				218
1. Clark, E.C.	72. Dinnington Annie	142. Hanna, E.A.		
2. Clark, Mary E.	73. Condie, Emily	143. Bissett, Maud, M.		
3. Wilson, E.C.	74. Loxall Dorothy	144. Wiggins, Clara		
4. Mansland, M.H.	75. Taylor, Emily	145. Biddiscombe, Kate		
5. Mansland, M.E.	76. Saltthwaite, E.M.	146. Clark, Ada, J.		
6. Middlebrooke, Kate	77. Bessie, Mary J.	147. Broadhead, Emily, M.		
7. Sagar, Jane E.	78. Loom, Anne	148. Swift, Sam, M.		
8. Tyline, Florence	79. Leach, Mary E.	149. Allgood, Caroline, S.		
9. Barlow, Anne, E.C.	80. Riley, Sarah, C.	150. Todd, Charlotte, B.		
10. Schofield, E.C.	81. Woodson, Alice	151. Woodall, Mabel		
11. Walton, Sarah	82. Rongbottom, Mary	152. Croft, Sarah, H.		
12. Roby, Anne, P.	83. Croft, Eliza, E.	153. Walker, Frances, M.		
13. Roby, E.C.	84. Rongbottom, Emily	154. Williamson, Mary, P.		
14. Brook, Sarah, E.	85. Oliver, Mary, C.	155. Thompson, Eleanor		
15. Fort, Lydia, A.E.	86. Black, Sarah, R.	156. Swales, Annie		
16. Greenwood, Ada	87. Smith, Mary	157. Bourne, Eliza, E.		
17. Spencer, Mary, E.	88. Robertson, Harriet	158. Clouston, Alice, A.		
18. Schofield, Eliza, E.	89. Jones, Jane, A.	159. Wicks, Maria		
19. Hiltoun, James, H.	90. Grundy, Mary, H.	160. Hayes, Constance, M.		
20. Stewart, Eliza	91. Claxton, Laura	161. Pittison, Clara		
21. Fernley, Anne, E.	92. Harrop, Fanny, H.	162. Wilkinson, Eleanor, R.		
22. Kibb, Maud, H.	93. Stephenson, Ann, E.	163. Bates, Eliza, J. H.		
23. Fignar, E.C. Maud, C.	94. Bailey, Sarah, J.	164. Gibb, Maud, H.		
24. Dredale, M.E.	95. Williams, Lucy, A.	165. Allen, Agnes, J.		
25. Paroch, Emily	96. Wood, Catherine	166. Black, Mary, E.		
26. Wallis, Mary, A.E.	97. Croxson, Alice, A.	167. Jase, Ronald, M.		
27. Griffiths, Julia	98. Parker, Grace, A.	168. Dixon, Mary, E.		
28. Willett, Mary, E.	99. Ellis, Mary, A.	169. Jones, Fanny		
29. Webster, Arabella	100. Bessie, J. E.	170. Woodall, Fanny, H.		
30. Webster, M. R.	101. Thistle, Lydia	171. Woodall, Fanny, H.		
31. Robison, Mary	102. Williamson, Mary, G.	172. Woodall, Kate		
32. Dargy, E.C.	103. Condie, Deborah	173. Henson, Anne, E.		
33. Dargy, Ada	104. Hattman, E. R.	174. Henson, Sarah, E.		
34. Dargy, Emily	105. Hardy, Anne, J.	175. Parker, Anne, M. R.		
35. Henshaw, C. A.	106. East, Annie	176. Harrison, Mary, E.		
36. Hampton, Adelaide	107. Flint, Emma	177. Stirling, Maud, E. R.		
37. Munday, Ada, M.	108. Amy, Mary	178. Lound, H. H.		
38. Munday, Fanny, E.	109. Mavin, Clara	179. Macpherson, Georgina		
39. Midgley, Mary, E.	110. Peck, C. Jane, Mary	180. Fickley, Georgina, J.		
40. Paroch, Alice	111. Smeaton, C. M.	181. Henson, Emily, M.		
41. MacKenzie, Eliza, J.	112. Croxson, Rebecca	182. Hirst, Anne		
42. MacKenzie, Eleanor	113. Croxson, Annie	183. Henson, Anne, E.		
43. MacKenzie, Ada	114. Croxson, Frances, E.	184. Stonehouse, Catherine		
44. Donnan, Emma, S.	115. Rodick, Emily, J.	185. Cratidge, Kate		
45. Fether, Jane, E.	116. Webster, Julia, M. W.	186. Clark, E. E.		
46. Lee, Ada, M.	117. Woodall, Emma	187. Clark, Barbara, E.		
47. Lyndall, Alice, E.	118. Toole, Emma, E.	188. Bourne, Charlotte		
48. Lyndall, M. R.	119. Rawton, Emily, E.	189. Stephens, Ann, M.		
49. Lyndall, Mary, H.	120. Robertson, Emma, E.	190. Ward, Ada, A.		
50. Collins, Anne, Louise	121. Salt, Fanny, M.	191. Ward, Mary, P.		
51. Ockelby, Dorothy, A.	122. Webster, C. E.	192. Fanny, Hannah, J.		
52. Garrow, Emily	123. Lewis, Helen	193. Croxson, Kate, E.		
53. Garrow, Mary, E.	124. Dodd, Florence, E.	194. Fether, Mary, E.		
54. Garrow, Eliza	125. Gaby, Hannah, E.	195. Noble, Mary, E.		
55. Redgrave, Anne, M.	126. Fether, Mary	196. Walker, Florence, M.		
56. Fether, Mary, E.	127. Fether, Mary	197. Rawton, Florence, E.		
57. Fether, Mary, E.	128. Roy, Ella, M.	198. Morris, Fanny, J.		
58. Fether, Mary, E.	129. Roy, Fanny, M.	199. Taylor, M. J.		
59. Fether, Mary, E.	130. Fether, Mary, E.	200. Taylor, Mary		
60. Fether, Mary, E.	131. Fether, Mary, E.	201. Fether, Mary, E.		
61. Fether, Mary, E.	132. Fether, Mary, E.	202. Fether, Mary, E.		
62. Fether, Mary, E.	133. Fether, Mary, E.	203. Fether, Mary, E.		
63. Fether, Mary, E.	134. Fether, Mary, E.	204. Fether, Mary, E.		
64. Fether, Mary, E.	135. Fether, Mary, E.	205. Fether, Mary, E.		
65. Fether, Mary, E.	136. Fether, Mary, E.	206. Fether, Mary, E.		
66. Fether, Mary, E.	137. Fether, Mary, E.	207. Fether, Mary, E.		
67. Fether, Mary, E.	138. Fether, Mary, E.	208. Fether, Mary, E.		
68. Fether, Mary, E.	139. Fether, Mary, E.	209. Fether, Mary, E.		
69. Fether, Mary, E.	140. Fether, Mary, E.			
70. Fether, Mary, E.	141. Fether, Mary, E.			
71. Fether, Mary, E.				



well-known philanthropists and supporters of the Congregational denomination. In 1857 they determined to establish a 'superior College for the district'. They rapidly modified this plan in order to create an 'Orphan Home and School for Boys and Girls', which accepted its first intake in 1864. Various local, independent Nonconformist churches were represented on the governing body. Until the Education Act of 1870, which created local school boards, education in England had been largely in the hands of the church and the responsibility of those families with the means to educate their young. State intervention and involvement, including school inspections, increased in the following decades. During that period philanthropic educational foundations, such as the one established by the Crossley brothers, still played a major role in enabling more children to receive at least some primary education.

The Education Act of 1870 had a positive impact on the quality of the education provided at Crossley Heath School, and particularly on that of the girls, which until then had largely been intended to prepare them for household service. With the introduction of a more academic curriculum, a headmistress was appointed in 1877 to oversee the girls' education, creating in effect two separate schools on the same site. Miss Larritt, the headmistress of the Girls' School,<sup>46</sup> held that post from 1879–80, resigning at the end of Nivedita's second year. If that were the case, Nivedita must have joined the school during the academic year of 1878–79, remaining there until the end of academic year 1893–4. According to Reymond, Miss Larritt was profoundly religious having been a missionary by training and also a member of the Plymouth Brethren (*ibid.*), a Nonconformist movement that looked to the Bible as its sole authority. Miss Larritt was succeeded by Miss Angela Louisa Collins, in whom

Nivedita confided (17–8). Miss Collins held the post until 1892 and thus well beyond Nivedita's remaining time at the school.

Reymond refers to life at Nivedita's school being 'stern' and 'austere',<sup>47</sup> and Foxe to Nivedita's reaction against 'the stifling idiocy of formal Victorian education',<sup>48</sup> although it is not clear whether this is Foxe's own retrospective judgement. At times, Reymond's account reads as though it could have been modelled on Charlotte Brontë's description in her novel *Jane Eyre* of Jane Eyre's miserable life at Lowood Institution, a charitable school. Nivedita's hair was cropped to curb any signs of pride and her relationship with Miss Collins seems to echo that of Jane Eyre's with the fictional Miss Temple. It is important to remember, however, that two of the most memorable novels depicting the harshness and narrowness of nineteenth-century education in England, namely, *Jane Eyre* and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, were both published two decades or more before the 1870 Education Act, respectively in 1847 and 1854. Even then Brontë referred to her character receiving an excellent education. I do not wish to exaggerate the speed of change resulting from that Act, but Nivedita joined Crossley Heath in 1878 by which time some changes had been made at that school following the 1870 Education Act. We have already noted an improvement in the girls' curriculum and the appointment of a headmistress in 1877. This may suggest that Nivedita, relative to the standards of those times, could well have received a better and broader education than would have been possible even a decade earlier. The history of the Crossley Heath School refers to the traditional subjects of scripture, reading, writing, and arithmetic being emphasised, but orphans also being taught geography, drawing, basic natural science and singing, although over a broader period than Nivedita's time at the school, and



Reymond states that Nivedita received teaching in several sciences as well as in art and music.<sup>49</sup>

The information provided by the Crossley Heath School is also helpful in enabling us to be more precise in determining how much time Nivedita spent in Ireland after her father's death and thus the extent of the opportunities of direct contact with her family. The period from the death of Nivedita's father and the family's consequent return to Ireland until the sisters' return to England must have been less than a year—after Nivedita's tenth birthday in October 1877 and presumably before the start of the new school year in the autumn of 1878.

The Crossleyan, January 1912

### Margaret Noble.

*A Tribute to a Remarkable Career.*

(By S. K. RATCLIFFE.)

"News comes by a private cablegram from Darjeeling, in the Himalayas, that Miss Margaret Noble (known throughout India as Sister Nivedita) died there a few days ago, after a short illness. The announcement will bring profound grief to a large number of English and American people, to whom Miss Noble was known alike by her books and her vivid personality. It would be true to say that no Englishwoman has ever made for herself a similar place in the affections of the Indian people, or has tried to do the work to which she put her hand.

Irish by birth and family, the daughter of a Nonconformist minister, Margaret Noble was known in London twenty years ago as perhaps the most eager and brilliant member of a group of new educationists who, among other things founded the Sesame Club. In the middle of the nineties she met the Swami Vivekananda, the first real missionary of Indian religion in the West. He had made a dramatic appearance at the Chicago Parliament of Religions two years before, had been astonishingly successful in his tour of the United States, and in 1895 was lecturing in London.

Margaret Noble became the most devoted of his followers, and in 1898 she went out to India to assist in the educational work of the Ramakrishna Brotherhood, of which Vivekananda was the head. She became, under the name of Sister Nivedita, an unattached member of the order, and began in her small house in Northern Calcutta, a school for Hindu girls and classes for Hindu women—her aim being to provide modernised instruction on the firm basis of Eastern feeling and ideals. She lived with extreme simplicity entirely among Indians. Her name became known far and wide; there were few Indians of distinction unknown to her; she identified herself with their culture and thoughts, and as a consequence her influence was incalculable. To Young Bengal she was an inspiration, for there can be no doubt it was through her words, spoken and written, that the ideal of Indian nationality grew to be a living and absorbing force.

Not on its metaphysical side, but in its vital social relations, Margaret Noble was a constant and intense student of Indian thought. Some years ago she spoke frequently to audiences large and small in many cities of India, and her power of speech was a wonderful thing. In later years, when fever had destroyed her fine physique, she was content to use her pen—for the most part in the Indian monthly reviews. To readers in the West she is known chiefly through her most ambitious

Reymond notes that Nivedita often said later in life that 'The first teachers to show me what a nation was were my [paternal] grandmother and [maternal] grandfather' (19). The nature of what was passed from grandmother to granddaughter, other than instruction in the Bible, is not clear (11-2). 'Grandfather Hamilton', however, is given centre stage in Reymond's account of the next stage of Nivedita's life (18-9). He 'fought' for Home Rule, being the undisputed head of the Young Ireland movement, and risked death and imprisonment 'ten times over' in the cause of land-reform, and as a reader and distributor of the Young Ireland movement's clandestine

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book, "The Web of Indian Life" (which by no means reveals her full powers), or through the "Cradle Tales of Hinduism," published three years ago. She contributed a paper on "The Present Position of Woman" to the proceedings of the Universal Races Congress held in London last July. She was forty-four years of age, and to many of us her death means the passing of a rare intelligence, and of a dauntless and most beautiful soul."

Our older readers will learn with regret of the death of Frank Oates (30) who died at Manchester on November 3rd, 1911; aged 54.

Frank Taylor (1073) the present holder of the "Crossley" Scholarship at Bradford Grammar School, has just gained the Hastings Exhibition of £100 per annum for four years, tenable at Queen's College, Oxford. He has also been made an Honorary Scholar of this College, a distinction awarded for the especial promise he showed in his examination.

A. F. Robinson (784), 35, Clarence Road, Barrow-in-Furness, would like to correspond with any Old Boy interested in Electrical Engineering, especially as applied to ship-building.

newspaper *The Nation*. With its beginnings in the 1830s, the Young Ireland movement grew out of and eventually split from Daniel O'Connell's Repeal Association, which was campaigning for the repeal of the 1800 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland. The Young Ireland movement instigated the abortive Young Irelander Rebellion of 1848. This was followed by sedition trials and transportation. Some of its supporters were later involved in the creation of the nationalist Irish Volunteer Brotherhood in the 1850s. The Young Ireland movement, therefore, was one of considerable importance, but, on the basis of the limited biographical detail provided about 'Grandfather Hamilton', it is difficult to identify a leader of this name of the national standing claimed by Reymond. Reymond states that the two girls went back regularly to Ireland from their school in Halifax at Christmas and during the summer when they stayed in the home of their maternal grandfather and Nivedita was substantially exposed to his influence. By this time, Nivedita's mother had moved to Belfast and opened a boarding-house. The history of the Crossley Heath School indicates that during that era pupils were given six-weeks holiday over the year. This, therefore, provides a reliable indication of how much time Nivedita and her sister could have spent in Ireland during their schooling and thus with their maternal grandfather.

Having passed the final examination at Crossley Heath School in 1884, Nivedita took up the first of several teaching positions largely in the north of England. By 1889, Nivedita had moved to Chester after short spells teaching at an orphanage at Rugby and at a secondary school in Wrexham. By then, her sister May was teaching in nearby Liverpool and her mother and her brother had joined May there. Her biographers suggest that it was at this point Nivedita became

acquainted with the educational theories of Pestalozzi and Froebel, and it was through contacts made with progressive educationalists that she was invited in 1890 to establish a progressive school in London where she later opened her own school, the Ruskin School.<sup>50</sup> The name given to the school is both a reminder of her acquaintance with Ruskin's ideas from her time at Wrexham and indicative of her broad familiarity with the Arts and Crafts Movement shaped, among others, by William Morris and Ruskin. This movement's appreciation of traditional crafts and forms of artistic production would prepare the ground for Nivedita's later thinking not just about art but also about co-operation, mutual aid—under the influence of Kropotkin—economics, and education. These were issues that would be central to that phase of the *swadeshi* movement triggered by the Partition of Bengal in 1905.

Once in London, it was her involvement in progressive education that led Nivedita into the Sesame Club, which Swamiji addressed in 1896. Nivedita's mother accompanied her to London in 1890, signalling that by then Nivedita's immediate family were all settled in England, not Ireland. This explains why in future, when Nivedita travelled from India, her personal connections drew her to England, specifically London, and not Ireland. When Swamiji's third visit to London proved to be so unhappy, it was at the Nobles' home in London he spent time until his departure for the United States.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, the historian faces a number of problems when considering claims made about the influence of Nivedita's 'Irishness' on her later career. Even acknowledging the growing unrest in nineteenth-century Ireland, we have to ask how sensible to this a child of Nivedita's age would have been, even if intellectually precocious. To what extent would a child of this age be able to assimilate the influence of close family members



said to have been involved in the agitation in Ireland? Apart from the fact that we have no way of knowing *what* was transmitted to the young Nivedita by members of her family, it is also difficult to test claims made about both the nature of their involvement in this growing struggle and their national standing as leaders. Turning to family-members as sources, Nivedita's sister May attended the same school as Nivedita. Both May and Richmond, like Nivedita, lived first in the Liverpool area and then London. It should not be forgotten, however, that both May and Richmond were born in England. May only had limited direct contact with her family in Ireland after the death of her father and during school holidays. Richmond was considerably younger than Nivedita. His memories of Nivedita's early years and of the family in Ireland, therefore, are likely to be second-hand at

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I can also recall the times we had in the bath when new boys used to be staggered at the first sight, and how reluctant some were to enter, and how the bigger boys used to throw them in, and what unearthly yells they (the new boys) used to make; how Alfred, the lodge-keeper, used to dab a lump of soft soap on our heads before we entered the large bath. Probably this is done at the present time, but it comes back to my mind after a lapse of nearly forty years.

On one occasion at midnight, when all were supposed to be asleep, we were awakened in dormitory 52 by the sound of cats. One by one the boys woke up, until we ventured to suggest that we should discover from whence the sound came. About ten arose, armed with a pillow each, and headed by P. W. Metcalfe (221) marched like soldiers through the dormitory into the lavatory, but to our disappointment could not find the pussies, and had to wend our way back to bed. Scores of incidents could be narrated of happy times at the C.O.H.: times we look back upon with pleasure, as being the best of our lives, and times of which many of us can narrate to our own offspring, and who think them quite glorious stories, and are never tired of hearing them."

H. O. Leach (958), New York, writes:—"It might interest you to know that the New York representatives of the Crossley School met at a dinner in the Hotel Astor, New York City, on the fourth of March.

It was surprising to all of us that there were only three 'Old Boys' who resided in this great metropolis. Their ages can be judged by their school numbers, namely, 173, 424, and 958.

We discussed a great deal the policy of the 'Old Boys' Magazine, and all agreed that in view of the fact that the Magazine received such comparatively small support, it would be better to make it an annual publication, giving more space to photographs and experiences of the Old Boys since they left school instead of devoting so much to reminiscences of the Old Boys when at school. Do you not agree yourself, that this information would be of greater benefit to the present boys at school? It might also be well to have one section devoted exclusively to school notes, stating what has happened during the year, etc.

It is certainly a shame that of the one thousand or more Old Boys out in the world, that there are so few who take any interest in the school, not even to the extent that they will expend a half-crown for the Magazine."

(What do our readers think of the above suggestion? We should mention that the magazine is not circulated in the School).—Ed.

best. His memoir of Nivedita is cited by Marie Louise Burke, having been published in Sankari Prasad Basu's *Nivedita Lokamata*,<sup>52</sup> to depict the context of Nivedita's religious life in England. A public supporter of Vivekananda, by 1902 Richmond was preparing for ordination as clergyman in the Church of England.<sup>53</sup> The historian's difficulties are made greater by the fact that Nivedita's biographers rarely give references to their sources, even when quoting statements by Nivedita, which makes evaluating information that might well have come from other sources, almost impossible. It is also striking that Nivedita made relatively few references to Ireland in her writings, mostly to different landscapes.

We can see signs of the growing sense of injustice and inequality in late nineteenth-century Ireland that would fuel the campaign for Irish

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### Items of Interest.

It was with deep regret that we heard of the death of Mr. C. J. Saniter, which occurred on March 4th, at Castleford. Mr. Saniter will be remembered by boys who passed through the School in the late nineties, as he was sixth form master during the years 1895-1901. Others will recognise him as one of the two old masters whose portraits we published, and who gave their impressions of the School, in our July number of 1913.

Since leaving the C.O.H., Mr. Saniter has been at Castleford up to the time of his death. His first venture was to purchase a private school there, which he continued until the County Council built a Secondary School in Castleford. He then closed his own school and accepted a post as a master in the new establishment.

He continued to shew his keen interest in our old school for years after leaving Halifax by joining the Old Boys picnics in the summer, and turning up at the "Past v. Present" football matches, often acting as referee in these games. So long as any boys still remained at Crossley's who were at school in his time, it was a special delight to him to come back and see them. Amongst Old Boys of his time he was held in the highest esteem, and there were many who had still warmer feelings for him. To such, the news of his untimely death at the age of forty-nine will come as a shock.

We read in a local paper that he was buried at Castleford Cemetery, on Saturday, March 7th, "in the presence of a large gathering of friends and pupils of the Secondary School at which Mr. Saniter was a very popular master."

In our *Items* for January, 1912, we gave an extract from the *Daily News* regarding the career of the late Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) (G194). We have just received a very interesting booklet, *Margaret Noble*, by S. K. Ratcliffe (Publishers, Sherratt & Noble, 34, Cross Street, Manchester) which is a reprint, with additions, from the *Sociological Review* of July, 1913, and which contains also tributes from Professor Geddes, Professor T. K. Cheyne, and others, who testify to the remarkable influence of Margaret Noble upon the thought and life of native India.

We have not space even to summarise the articles. We recommend our readers to get the book and judge for themselves, but we give one extract from the eloquent tribute of S. K. Ratcliffe.

"Nothing that Margaret Noble touched remained commonplace.....Her dominant notes were clarity and sincerity, and an incomparable vitality. She was of all the men and women



independence, leading to the creation of the self-proclaimed Republic of Ireland in 1919 and the Irish Free State in 1922. But Nivedita's Ireland was not the Ireland of immediately before and after the Easter Uprising of 1916—she died in 1911—far less the Ireland of the violent struggles of the mid or late twentieth century. She did not live to see the deferral of promised Home Rule to Ireland that followed the outbreak of World War I. It was Ireland in the aftermath of the terrible potato blight of the late 1840s with its ensuing famine and significant emigration to the New World. It was an Ireland long marked by friction between powerful, largely Protestant landlords and their vulnerable, largely Roman Catholic tenants who faced the constant threat of eviction. It was the inequality and injustice associated with the power of these landlords rather than simply religious differences that heightened tensions between these groups. This was part of the inheritance of the strategic 'Plantation' in Ireland of Protestant settlers from England and Scotland from the sixteenth century, particularly in the North, which followed in the wake of earlier, more sporadic immigrations. It was, in effect, the colonisation of Ireland by the English Crown. The chronology of the arrival of Nivedita's paternal family in Ireland, and possibly their reported early antipathy to Roman Catholics, suggests that it too could have been part of this migration and settlement pattern from Scotland. The consequences of this process of Plantation included the creation of Protestant Anglo-Irish ruling elite, also known as the Protestant Ascendancy, and a shift in the balance of the population exacerbated by the large-scale Irish emigrations of the mid or late nineteenth century. As the population became more English, so Irish culture and the use of the Irish language was undermined. The causes of land reform, Catholic Emancipation, the Repeal Movement<sup>54</sup>, which

was directed against the 1800 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland, in different ways fed into the campaign for Home Rule, which in the latter decades of the century had become very much a party political matter under leaders such as Charles Parnell and John Redmond.

It was the cause of Irish Home Rule, we are told, which was actively supported by Nivedita's family and permeated the political ethos in which she was raised. At that time, the goal of the Home Rule movement was distinct from that of the separatist, nationalist movement. While the latter sought complete independence from Britain, the former sought devolution of powers to a legislative assembly in Ireland but not to cut Ireland's ties with Britain.

### ***Nivedita in London During 1890–98***

The purpose of this article is not to minimise the importance of Nivedita's Irish ancestry. Rather, the intention is to redefine the way we understand this as preparation for her future role in India by moving the focus away from the influential, popular image of her as a 'fiery Irish nationalist', which has often been invoked as an explanation of her adoption of the cause of Indian freedom. Here I agree to an extent with Elleke Boehmer who has argued that, when Nivedita 'remade herself into an Indian nationalist, this owed little to her birth and the examples she could have drawn on from recent Irish history',<sup>55</sup> stressing instead a mix of influences and above all Nivedita's desire to please her guru. Where I differ from Professor Boehmer is in the greater emphasis I place on Nivedita's involvement with Irish interest groups in London, which appears to provide at least anticipations of the tactics that Nivedita later adopted in India. It is also important, as I have emphasised above, to get behind the language of violent action typically used by Nivedita's biographers in their sweeping descriptions of the struggle that

was pursued in different ways in nineteenth-century Ireland, and in their accounts of the particular contribution of members of Nivedita's family to this cause in relation to Nivedita's 'fiery' temperament or her 'radicalism'. We should not lose sight of the fact that it was the Irish Home Rule movement that Nivedita is said to have supported. Even after the turn of the century when the nationalist cause had strengthened, the cause of Home Rule retained widespread support and had been carried forward by Parnell and Redmond working through parliament.

By considering Nivedita's experiences as a teacher and then headmistress in London, rather than looking back to what she might or might not have absorbed from her family either when very young or during relatively brief school vacations in Ireland, we get a far better sense of the way in which her commitment to Ireland shaped her views at the time she met Swamiji and on her arrival in India. She was by this time clearly liberal in her religious opinions as she continued her 'seeking', and progressive to an extent in her social attitudes, as is evident from her early published interventions on behalf of the poor and the rights of women that arose out of her experiences as a teacher in the north of England.<sup>56</sup> She later referred to this in a letter to Josephine MacLeod as 'woman-making'.<sup>57</sup> But when Nivedita spoke in favour of the Irish Home Rule Bill at the Sesame Club in London, this in itself should not be read as unambiguous evidence of Nivedita holding a radical position in relation to Ireland's political future, which shortly she would readily transfer to the Indian context.<sup>58</sup> By then, the Liberals under William Gladstone had already accepted the principle of Irish Home Rule.

Through the Sesame Club, however, Nivedita met William Butler Yeats and George Bernard Shaw. Although raised as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, it was Yeats who in

1904 co-founded the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which grew out of the energy generated by the Irish Literary Revival Yeats helped to promote in Dublin and London. The revival was aimed at countering the progressive weakening of the Irish language and traditional culture. An Irish nationalist and former member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Yeats later served as a senator in the Irish Free State. Shaw, on the other hand, supported the cause of Home Rule and thus remaining within the British Empire, although his work too was performed at the Abbey Theatre, the heart of the Irish Literary Revival. Through the Sesame Club, Nivedita also met the Conservative and Unionist politician Ronald McNeill—First Baron Cushendun—who was born in County Antrim, Northern Ireland, and described by Raymond<sup>59</sup> as fiercely opposed to Nivedita's position on Irish affairs. For a politician like McNeill, even Home Rule and limited devolution would have seemed a betrayal of the Unionist cause. We are told that Nivedita had joined a 'Free Ireland' group shortly on moving to London and that she was a close friend of Octavius Beatty, the editor of the *Wimbledon News*, a mouthpiece of Irish organisations to which she contributed pro-Boer articles on the Boer War.<sup>60</sup>

It is in the early 1900s that we find more evidence in Nivedita's letters<sup>61</sup> of her increasing exposure to the influence of Peter Kropotkin and Guiseppe Mazzini.<sup>62</sup> Her references to social theorists were generally passing and not specific, with the exception of Kropotkin whose theory of 'mutual aid' was one to which she returned on several occasions in her writings. She grew increasingly disillusioned with British rule in India and became committed to its overthrow.<sup>63</sup> Determined to support the development of a new understanding of 'Indian nationality' in which 'Hindu and Mohammedan must become one',<sup>64</sup> she looked to the role of national and civic art in

contributing to this end. In *Aggressive Hinduism*, Nivedita declared in 1905:<sup>65</sup>

But far more, on behalf of India herself, do we need artists ... who can wake in us the great new senses. We want men of the Indian blood who can portray for us the men of old ... in such a fashion as to stir the blood. We want through these to feel out, as a people, towards the new duties of the time to be. Not only to utter India to the world, but also to voice India to herself,—this is the mission of art, divine mother of the ideal, when it descends to clothe itself in forms of realism.<sup>66</sup>

Even by 1899, Nivedita had begun to reflect on the way in which her political goal for India had changed since 1898.<sup>67</sup> It was in 1898, as she recalled in *Notes of Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda*, when she 'startled' Swamiji by her passionate declaration of attachment to the 'English flag'. Several weeks after this incident he told her 'Really, patriotism like yours is sin!'<sup>68</sup> As with the popular image of Nivedita as a 'fiery Irish nationalist' because of her origins, we also find that her acceptance of the theories of the anarchist Kropotkin and her interest in the Pan-Asianism of Kakuzo Okakura have led to inflated claims about her involvement in and influence on revolutionary politics in Bengal. Peter Heehs<sup>69</sup> notes that this view of her being actively involved in such politics, and the violence some groups adopted, has been rejected by all professional historians who have considered it. Probably closer to the mark is Kumari Jayawardena's<sup>70</sup> judgement that 'Nivedita's vitality was to inspire many others—Indian politicians, artists, poets, scientists', reflecting as it does the breadth of Nivedita's interests, her networking abilities, and thus the extent of both her direct and indirect influence in Bengal in the first decade of the twentieth century. This pattern of activity is consistent with her brother's testimony

that, wherever Nivedita went, a 'literary club was sure to spring up'.<sup>71</sup>

In the same decade, we also find Nivedita putting the creative arts in the service of the cause for freedom in a manner reminiscent of Yeats and the other architects of the Irish Literary Revival.<sup>72</sup> In Ireland, the founding of the Abbey Theatre had been followed by the creation in 1908 of St Enda's School in Dublin by Padraig Pearse, generally counted as one of the leaders of the Easter Uprising. Many of the classes at the school were conducted in Irish and its curriculum favoured the Arts and Irish culture in order to counter the Anglo-centric teaching in most schools in Ireland. Some pupils from St Enda's were among those who took part in the Easter Uprising, although, as we noted earlier, this event divided supporters both of Home Rule and of the campaign for complete independence. I am not suggesting that Pearse's school provided a model for Nivedita as Nivedita's commitment to Indian culture and the arts preceded the school's foundation. But this direction taken by supporters of the Irish cause exemplifies the connections in debates in different colonial settings between the undermining of traditional culture by the colonial power, the need to revive language and the arts, the need for an appropriate style of education, and the need to regain independence to ensure these things happen.

## Conclusion


This article has emphasised that Nivedita took a step that few other women or men of her time would have taken simply by accepting a Hindu guru as her 'Master'. In re-making her life in India, she took a further step that few of Swamiji's other followers in London and the US felt obliged even to consider. In adopting the cause of the struggle for India's freedom, she took a final step that required her to sever her formal



links with the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. This marked her out even from Swamiji's other intimate European and American devotees who had followed him to India.

Instead of approaching the Nivedita of the early 1890s as a 'fiery Irish nationalist' or radical, I have suggested that we should begin with her role as an educator. Her earliest expressions of progressive social ideals and activism were rooted in her experience as a teacher. For all its austerity, her education had given her wide interests and opportunities that enabled her to live her life as an independent woman. The cause of women's right and education was one she had taken up before she met Swamiji and one to which she remained committed in India, although mindful of expectations of Indian girls and women at that time. It was of education that Swamiji first spoke when he envisaged sannyasins serving India's poor and oppressed, and it was something to which he returned constantly throughout his life.

I have also argued that, by looking more closely at Nivedita's time in London before she moved to India and the contacts she made there, we get a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which her relationship to Ireland impinged on her growing commitment to social and political activism. It is clear that she was exposed to and took part in debates about the renewal of cultures undermined and sapped by colonial powers. She may well increasingly have come to see parallels between what were then struggles for Home Rule in Ireland and India, but these at that time both represented moderate political opinions relative to the separatist alternative. These formative years in London, I have argued, provided the platform for Nivedita's imminent involvement in service, education, supporting artistic endeavours in India, and playing a vigorous part in debates in India about the nation's future and shaping its culture.

Viewing Nivedita's political position in relation to Ireland at this time as closer to the moderate mainstream, rather than what was then the more radical nationalist, separatist cause, also explains why it took several years of living in India, even after having been challenged by Swamiji, before Nivedita adopted a far more critical view of the British Empire and thus became a campaigner for India's freedom from British rule. She did not arrive in India as a 'fiery nationalist', whatever her Irish ancestry might have given her. She became more radicalised as she turned her back on the gradualist political agenda of Home Rule, with which she was familiar from her days in London. Some of the strategies she adopted in India, her participation in cultural debates and her promotion of 'national' art, may well also have owed much to her involvement in the Irish Home Rule cause in London and the rippling effects of the Irish Literary Revival in London. 

### Notes and References

1. For the sake of simplicity, although I shall be dealing largely with the period prior to 1898, I shall depart from the usual convention of using the name Margaret Noble until she was given the name Sister Nivedita by Swami Vivekananda in 1898 and refer to her as Nivedita throughout.
2. Lizelle Reymond, *Fille de L'Inde* (Paris: V Attinger, 1945).
3. Lizelle Reymond, *The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita* (Madras: Samata, 1985), vi–vii.
4. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1982).
5. When reference is made to Nivedita in the literature of the Ramakrishna movement more generally, it is frequently to her role as an observer and interpreter of Swamiji's mission, particularly in London and in India from 1898 when he travelled with Nivedita and other devotees.
6. See for example, references in Gwilym Beckerlegge, 'Noble, Margaret Elizabeth [Sister Nivedita] (1867–1911)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford University, 2007).

7. See *The Dedicated*; Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita's Girls' School, 1977); Barbara Foxe, *Long Journey Home: A Biography of Margaret Noble (Nivedita)* (London: Rider, 1975).
8. Maina Singh, 'Political Activism and The Politics of Spirituality: The Layered Identities of Sister Nivedita/Margaret Noble (1867–1911)', *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. T Foley and M O'Connor (Dublin: Irish Academic, 2006), 55.
9. Harold W French, *The Swan's Wide Waters* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1974), 98.
10. *Sister Nivedita*, 6; Pravrajika Atmaprana, 'Sister Nivedita's Discipleship', *Western Women in the Footsteps of Swami Vivekananda*, ed. Pravrajika Atmaprana (New Delhi: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, 1995), 123.
11. *The Dedicated*, 20; *Long Journey Home*, 14–5.
12. *The Dedicated*, 16.
13. Nonconformist Protestant churches are those that separated from the established Church of England or Anglican Church.
14. *The Dedicated*, 24.
15. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 2.461.
16. *Sister Nivedita*, 6.
17. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 6 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1985), 6.289.
18. *Vivekananda in Indian Newspapers 1893–1902*, eds. Sankari Prasad Basu and Sunil Behari Ghosh (Calcutta: Basu and Bhattacharya, 1969), 283.
19. See *Swami Vivekananda in Contemporary Indian News (1893–1902)*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols. (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1997), 1.429.
20. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.688.
21. As characterised by Steven Sutcliffe, 'Seekers, Networks and "New Age"', *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 18/2 (1998), 97–114, 107; cited in Gwilym Beckerlegge, *The Ramakrishna Mission: The Making of a Modern Hindu Movement* (New Delhi: Oxford University, 2000), 177.
22. See *The Ramakrishna Mission: The Making of a Modern Hindu Movement: Part Three*; and Gwilym Beckerlegge, 'The Early Spread of Vedanta Societies: An Example of "Imported Localism"' in *Numen*, 51/3 (2004), 296–320, for more detailed studies of the growth of Vedanta in the US and London during the late nineteenth century, and Gwilym Beckerlegge, "A Readiness to Get Truth From Whatever Quarter of the Horizon It May Hail": Ralph Waldo Emerson, Friedrich Max Muller, and Swami Vivekananda United in A Common Cause', *Pra-buddha Bharata*, 102/1 (January 1997), 201–4; and Gwilym Beckerlegge, 'Expectations of Vedanta: Why has Swami Vivekananda's Message Appealed to Individuals in the West?', *International Understanding for Human Unity: Past Lessons and Present Prospects*, ed. R Chakrabarti (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2015), 57–78, for a briefer discussion of some of the issues raised in these longer studies.
23. See *The Early Spread of Vedanta Societies: An Example of "Imported Localism"*, 296–320.
24. See Chapters 7 and 8 in *The Ramakrishna Mission*, 143, 180.
25. See 'The early spread of Vedanta Societies: an example of "imported localism"', 296–320.
26. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.22.
27. See Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1983), 101.
28. *Long Journey Home*, 16.
29. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.20.
30. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Worship', *The Conduct of Life*, (1860) <<http://www.emersoncentral.com/worship.htm>> accessed 04 November 16.
31. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.21. Emphasis added.
32. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.482, 530.
33. *The Dedicated*, 9.
34. *Sister Nivedita*, 2.
35. *Long Journey Home*, 12.
36. See 'Noble, Margaret Elizabeth [Sister Nivedita] (1867–1911)', <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/95037>> accessed 04 November 2016.
37. See *The Dedicated*, 9–10.
38. Three other siblings born between 1970 and 1974 perished. See *Long Journey Home*, 13.
39. *The Dedicated*, 14.
40. *Sister Nivedita*, 2.
41. *The Dedicated*, 14.
42. *Sister Nivedita*, 2.

43. See *Long Journey Home*.
44. The following information has been taken from the Crossley Heath School's webpage devoted to Nivedita on which the School has included information from its archive and from the School's history. To the best of my knowledge, this information has not been included in previous studies of Nivedita. See 'Margaret Elizabeth Noble (Sister Nivedita)' <<http://www.crossleyheath.org.uk/school-information/school-history/margaret-elizabeth-noble-sister-nivedita/>> accessed 04 November 2016 and 'School History' <<http://www.crossleyheath.org.uk/school-information/school-history/>> accessed 04 November 2016.
45. See 'Margaret Elizabeth Noble (Sister Nivedita)' <<http://www.crossleyheath.org.uk/school-information/school-history/margaret-elizabeth-noble-sister-nivedita/>> accessed 04 November 2016.
46. *The Dedicated*, 16, refers to a Miss Larrett.
47. *The Dedicated*, 15–6.
48. *Long Journey Home*, 16.
49. *The Dedicated*, 17–8.
50. In time, Nivedita would commend the kindergarten system for development in India, as in her lengthy letter to Swami Akhandananda in 1903; See *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.574–80. See also her extensive writings on education more generally in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5.1–75.
51. *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 5.73–4.
52. See Sankari Prasad Basu, *Nivedita Lokamata*, 4 vols (Calcutta: Ananda, 1962), 1.426–31, as quoted in *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 3.309.
53. *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 5.74.
54. The 1800 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland had resulted in Ireland having a subordinate status compared to the full union enjoyed by England, Wales, and Scotland.
55. Elleke Boehmer, 'Friable Transnationalism: The Question of the South African Gandhi and the Irish Nivedita', *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. T Foley and M O'Connor (Dublin: Irish Academic, 2006), 58–67; 64.
56. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5.374.
57. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.482.
58. Unfortunately the text of this speech does not appear to have survived. Some papers of the Sesame Club have been preserved in the British government's National Archives but not before 1897.
59. See *The Dedicated*, 30.
60. I have not been able to find any reference beyond Nivedita's biography to Beatty and this newspaper. It is unfortunate that the texts of Nivedita's articles on the Boer War, which could have provided additional indicators of the extent of Nivedita's political radicalism at this point in her life, do not appear to have survived. It was presumably this same 'Beatty' who disappointed Nivedita once in India in a response to her agenda: See *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.35; although he seemingly remained part of Nivedita's circle in London (1.36).
61. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.3, 381; 2.539, 560, 566.
62. Nivedita's attraction to Mazzini's ideology might well have been strengthened by the religious basis of his Italian nationalism. The anarchist Peter Kropotkin held the widely-shared rationalist expectation of that period that religion would simply die out, but his emphasis on self-sufficiency would have been congenial.
63. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.126, 435–8; 2.540, 647, 721.
64. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.553; For example *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 4.205–6, 5.147–153.
65. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 3.503–4.
66. For fuller discussion of the role of Indian art in the style of Hindu apologetics shaped by Vivekananda, see Gwilym Beckerlegge, 'The Swami and the Artist: The Use of Indian Art in Swami Vivekananda's Apologetics', *Colonialism, Modernity and Religious Identities*, ed. G Beckerlegge (New Delhi: Oxford University, 2008), 213–38.
67. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.126.
68. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.287.
69. Peter Heehs, *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism: Essays in Modern Indian History* (Delhi: Oxford University, 1998), 74.
70. Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 193.
71. *The Dedicated*, 28.
72. See *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.715.



# Nivedita and Her Times

Somenath Mukherjee

## Prelude

EVER SINCE SHE BREATHED HER LAST more than a hundred years ago at a hill station in India, Sister Nivedita has remained an icon of renunciation and nunhood in the minds of great many people who are aware of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement. But her greatness is mostly attributed to her unique devotion to her mentor Swami Vivekananda. True, it is almost impossible to gain a look at Nivedita without Swamiji in the background. His magnetic personality and brilliant teaching first brought her to India. Even though, her quest for truth and ideal beyond common ambitions was no less responsible for the inter-global journey. Later on Swamiji reshaped her entire life and mission in a way that seemingly has no match in this world. But notwithstanding all we know in this regard, a closer look at Nivedita's life, more so when Swamiji was no more, has always its historical relevance. And to know a little about this we shall have to look into her life and background which she gave up before coming to India.

## Early Life

Nivedita, *nee* Margaret Elizabeth Noble, was born as the first child of Samuel and Mary Noble in Dungannon, North Ireland, on 28 October

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Postal Stamp Issued in Commemoration of Sister Nivedita

1867. Family environment gave her a firm religious background. Her grandfather John Noble had been a minister of the Wesleyan Church in North Ireland. Her father too was groomed up for the Congregational ministry at the Lancashire Independent College. Later he went to the Wesleyan Church and studied theology before becoming ordained and sent to Oldham in England. In 1876 he moved to Great Torrington in Devonshire; there he began to live with his family. But fate did not permit him a long life. When he left the earth merely at thirty four, his family had little financial means to protect itself. Long after, in a letter to Mrs Ole Bull on 29



*Residence of Mrs Samuel R Nobel, Nivedita's Mother, Ireland*

August 1906, Nivedita would write: 'I have often wondered what my own life wd. have been, had the awful blow of my Father's death not been dealt me at its start. That made me Sannyasini ... and the Child of the Great—homeless save in thought and struggle and work.' Even in here, in expressing her childhood bereavement, Nivedita displayed her greatness. For she discovered how such anguish and hardship that befell her family eventually elevated her soul to become the *Child of the Great*—with only her thoughts, work, and struggle to live with. And history knows today how she earned immortality with those three of her great wealth.

However, the death of Samuel Noble took his family of four, his wife with three almost

destitute children, to Ireland to live with Mary's father—Richard Hamilton. Leaving her children there, Mary had to move to London for a kindergarten course. With what she eventually learnt she tried her luck in London for two years, but that hardly was sufficient to raise her family. She came back to her father's house, and tried with alternative means. But whatever had followed, Nivedita never enjoyed a life of sufficiency during her childhood, adolescence or young days. But hardship taught her to locate the real wealth of life, and she never faltered in gaining that lesson.

### **Formative Years**

Nivedita and her sister May were sent to Halifax

College, which ran under the British Congregationalist Church, for their formal education. They both lived in Hostel. This regulated life allowed Nivedita to explore new avenues to worthwhile her time—she developed the habit, albeit love, for books. Gradually grew the power of assimilation and original thinking. Perhaps this was from here that she began to look for something creative, meaningful – far from the mundane calls of life.

A little while ago we have seen that her mother went to London for a kindergarten course. And we see again that in 1884, when at seventeen she passed her final examination from the Halifax College, Nivedita began teaching at a school in Keswick. This proves the inclination of the English families to allow their women folks to accept teaching as a job. Secondly, there were more or less opportunities for such jobs. This had been made possible by two European legends who were the pioneers of innovative and positive ideas in educating children. The first was the Swiss educationist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), the other was the German educationist Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852). Their ideals and methods had expanded the field of mass education allowing opportunities to explore new vistas as well as careers in education. With her keen and compassionate mind Nivedita was greatly attracted to the reforming ideas of these two educationists. This inclination had also played a great role in shaping what she later became. However to go back to where we were, Nivedita remained in Keswick for around two years before moving to Rugby and accept a teaching job in a charitable orphanage.

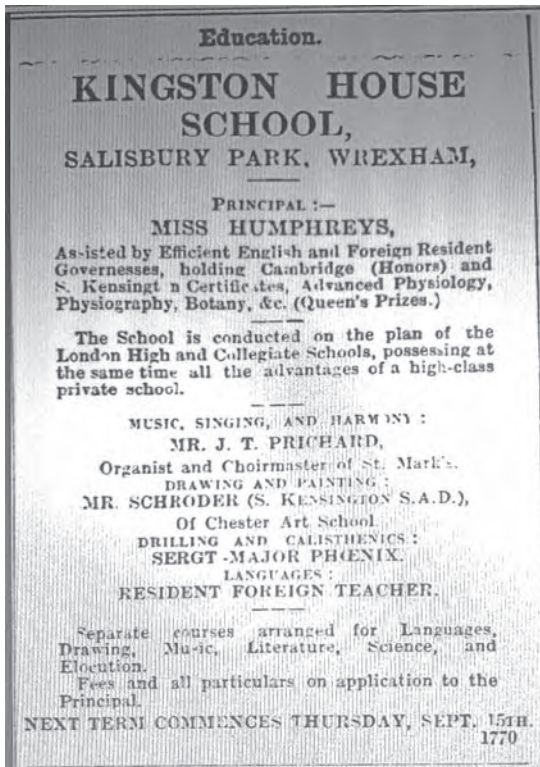
Sometime in 1887 Nivedita moved to Wrexham, an area in north Wales. Wrexham is largely known for its natural resources. When Nivedita had been there, the place was predominantly a coal-mining area. Fact says that Wrexham's 'local

story of coal-mining goes back to fifteenth century'.<sup>1</sup> With noticeable decline in the early nineteenth century, soaring mining began with steam bringing in steamships and railway engines. Domestic demands of gas for heating also fuelled the high need for coal. In 1854 there were about twenty-six mines operating on the western side of the town. This had brought in hordes of cheap labour; and on their heels came hordes of impoverished families.

Nivedita was twenty-one when she arrived at Wrexham to begin her career in a school. Hitherto we seemingly knew almost nothing about her school at Wrexham. But a newspaper advertisement, reprinted here, searched out during preparation of this article gives us information about its name, address, standard, and other things. It had been a secondary school named Kingston House School, located at Salisbury Park, Wrexham. But this place allowed Nivedita scope for welfare work among the insolvent families of the miners. Her genetic predisposition to serve the poor and destitute was too strong to disown. Therefore, she enrolled herself as a district worker with the St Mark's Church at Wrexham. Now began the real problem—a clash between ideal and interests.

As a district worker she embarked upon welfare job untiringly beyond her school hours. She even visited the thickly settled dingy houses of the miners' families to acquaint herself with their daily life. What she witnessed left her heart distressed with their plight and indignant to the people who dared to bring such treatment to fellow people. But in her compassionate drive to bring some comfort to the lives of those unfortunate people, she forgot to discriminate who went to the local church and who did otherwise; or, for that matter, who belonged to which congregation. This was obviously contrary to the practice of the people who mattered at Wrexham. And





*New Finding: Advertisement of  
Kingston House School, Wrexham*

soon Nivedita understood that she either had to toe the lines of the local church, or continue on her own and face the consequence. She gave up the welfare job and took out her pen to use it 'at the service of the oppressed'.<sup>2</sup> During those days she mostly wrote under pseudonyms to avoid troubles to the people she wrote about, and her teaching job as well; those writings were published in local papers like the *North Wales Guardian*. This allowed her to know about her ability to write. Interested readers may still find the fire and commitment in what she wrote in those days from *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*.

But it was not the strain of her work or the sad experience of witnessing peoples' miseries that took away Nivedita from Wrexham to Chester in 1889. It was the chance meeting with a like-minded young engineer working in Wrexham

and his dearly mother that first brought a lively change in the young teacher at Wrexham. The young engineer in his mindset and preferences differed little with Nivedita. Long conversations in the former's drawing room dotted with a few cups of coffee or tea, proximity of the loving mother of the former engaged in daily chores in her house, and on some other days, walking together on the roads of Wrexham, deeply absorbed in discussions which only young people could make possible, allowed the initial friendship to grow into deeper love. But the bolt struck the lives of those two loving souls when they were about to announce their engagement. A sudden illness came upon that young man; in fact his illness was what exactly earlier took away Nivedita's father. This time too, death hardly faltered in striking Nivedita where it hurt most. Following a brief illness of about a fortnight or so the young engineer was gone forever. For extremely heartbroken Nivedita Wrexham had no longer been a place to drag on her days.

## 2

At this point of time she did exactly what most people do in such distress, she went to her family. During those days both her sister Mary and brother Richmond were living at Liverpool. The former was working as a teacher, while the latter studying in a college. It was also decided that their mother, Mary Noble, would also come from Ireland and live with her children. Though initially work had kept Nivedita at Chester, she normally stayed the weekends with her family. While in Liverpool she did get herself acquainted with many interesting and thoughtful people including those who too, like her, were planning to bring innovative changes in education. Besides, through her own efforts and encouraged by new friends, her writings did have a chance to develop itself in Liverpool. Here Nivedita met a

remarkable lady named Madam de Leeuw, who easily found in her what she required for a new school at Wimbledon. About this lady a London monthly writes: 'Madame de Leeuw has half a dozen languages at the tip of her tongue.'<sup>3</sup> Leeuw invited Nivedita to join her new school at Wimbledon. We have stumbled upon an old newspaper insertion, reprinted here, allowing us some unknown information about this Wimbledon school. The said advertisement in the *Wrexham Advertiser* of Saturday, 11 January 1890, informs us that it had been a Girls' boarding school, named Kingston House School, which began functioning on 21 January 1890. Nivedita joined there as the Co-Principal with Madame Leeuw as its Principal. When her job brought her to Wimbledon, her family also came with her and made it their permanent place of residence. Nivedita remained with the Kingston House School for around two years before opening a school of her own, named Ruskin School, in Wimbledon in 1892.

When Nivedita began to live in Wimbledon, her contacts with various notable personalities in London also grew. In the Ruskin School she came in contact with a real friend. He was Ebenezer Cooke, education reformer and lithographer, who associated himself with Nivedita's new school to teach and implement newer ideas on art and drawing. Cooke would later earn a modest and enduring recognition. Among the people Nivedita befriended this time had been Octavius Beatty, a journalist and editor of the *Wimbledon News*, an organ of the Irish associations in England. At this material time there were some political developments which drew Nivedita to the cause of the 'Free Ireland' group working for Home Rule. She began to act in its cause by imparting lectures in public meetings, as well as organizing centres of resistance in the South of England. Some information may help us to understanding the background.

A protestant lawyer and nationalist leader of Ireland first coined the word 'Home Rule' in 1870, when he demanded home governance for Ireland. But the word entered British politics just before Liberal Prime Minister W E Gladstone first presented the Home Rule bill to the Parliament on 8 April 1886. The bill envisaged limited self-rule for Ireland within the abiding sovereign of the British Parliament—and thereby proposing an end to Irish representation in the Westminster Parliament. But the bill failed to have success. Again in 1893 Gladstone introduced his second Home Rule bill for Ireland with continued Irish representation in the British Parliament. Again the bill was thwarted. And in both the times it was the Upper House of the British Parliament which stood in the way. Later on, the same history was almost repeated with a little bit success in the offing which the impending First World War disallowed to mature. The solution came in 1920 with complicated political hues, though that hardly concerns us here.

But her association with the 'Free Ireland' group brought Nivedita to a prominent European personality—he was Peter Kropotkin, the Russian revolutionary, geographer, and the foremost theorist of the anarchist movement. He was a revolutionary in exile. In 1886 he began to live in England following three years imprisonment in France for sedition, and remained there till before the Russian Revolution in 1917. Nivedita's growing admiration for Kropotkin often took her to Ealing, an English suburb, where the revolutionary lived with his wife.

During this time Nivedita's contacts with intellectual and illustrious people in London continuously grew. Through Ebenezer Cooke she came in contact with Lady Ripon and began to attend her exclusive salon where eminent people used to visit for discussions on art and literature. In no time there she earned eminence, and with

active support from Ronald McNeill converted the Salon into the Sesame Club, which went on to play a vital role in the English society. Ronald had been a great association for Nivedita. Apart from becoming the editor of *The St James's Gazette* in 1900–4, he later also worked as the assistant editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1906–10. Later in 1927, he became the Lord Cushendun and served in many illustrious political offices—namely financial secretary to the Treasury; acting foreign secretary from August to December 1928, and the chief British representative to the League of Nations.

A few more words about the illustrious Sesame Club:

Sesame Club, 29 Dover Street, founded in 1895 for men and women, by, among others, Lady Isabel Margesson. The club organized a literary and educational programme and offered a lower

subscription to professional women, especially hoping to attract teachers. ... The club was still in existence in 1924. By 1963 the Sesame, Imperial and Pioneer Club (presumably the three had amalgamated) was based at 49 Grosvenor Street, London W.<sup>4</sup>

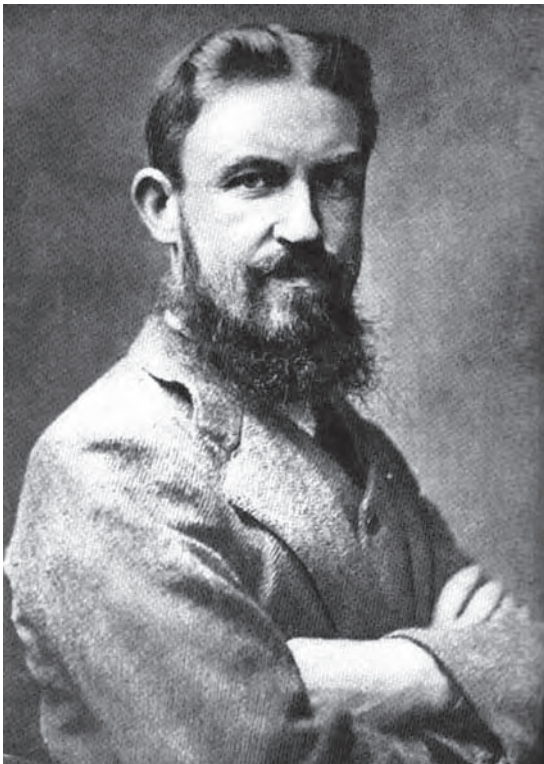
It had been in the Sesame Club that Nivedita came in contact with some of the great minds of Europe; among them were George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Huxley.

It has been learnt<sup>5</sup> that expansion of progressive education was among the leading aims of Sesame Club, and Nivedita had once been its Secretary. Elsewhere we read: 'By 1897, it [Sesame Club] had a claimed membership of nine hundred, composed of some who used it purely as a social club and others who wished to pursue their interest in educational theories and practices. Courses on drawing were organised as were others on wood, Sloyd and nature study.'<sup>6</sup>

Nivedita had also closely worked with H M Hyndman. This is significant, for Hyndman had his own importance in contemporary England. He was a prominent English Socialist. His career began as a journalist; worked with the *Pall Mall Gazette* before founding the Democratic Federation in 1881, which later became the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884. He was the editor of *Justice*, a vocal supporter of Indian nationalism and independence from the British. His book entitled *The Bankruptcy of India: An Enquiry into the Administration of India under the Crown*, written in 1886, reads:

When Englishmen speak and write of the history of India, they too often forget what an insignificant portion of that history the record of our conquest and domination really forms. Three thousand years ago the nations of India were a collection of wealthy, and, in a sense, highly civilised peoples, with at least one great language, with an elaborate code of laws and

George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950)





social regulations, possessed of exquisite artistic taste and beautiful manufactures of many kinds, and endowed with religious ideas and philosophic thoughts which have greatly—we still scarcely know how greatly—influenced the development of the most progressive races of the West.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it had been during his visit to London in 1900 when Nivedita began to interact with Hyndman.

### **European Backdrop**

The immediate historical background of Europe had its obvious influence on Nivedita. And we know that the West we see today has mostly been the outcome of its history of the nineteenth century. So let us have a hurried look at the major happenings during that period.

We may begin at the Congress of Vienna which took place between 1814 and 1815. There the leaders of Europe—Austria, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, decided to redraw the map of Europe and tried to bring a major shift in approach and attitude that had till then been influenced by the French Revolution. In 1821 the Greeks waged a war of independence against the Ottoman Empire, while in 1830 the Kingdom of the Netherlands, earlier constituted in the Congress of Vienna, broke apart. This was followed by a series of republican revolts against European monarchies in 1848 which first began in Sicily, and then spread over France, Germany, Italy, and the Austrian Empire. But the liberals did not succeed and the revolution was thwarted by armed forces. But the ambition remained; people continually aspired to participate in the ruling, improve their living conditions and to live as a nation within a unified state with autonomy and independence. This movement was later termed as the Spring of Nations—the concept of nation and nationality came upon the societies

like never before. However, this movement was not seen in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, as well as in the Russian Empire.

In 1861 Italy was declared a nation-state under the Sardinian king Victor Immanuel II. This was followed by the unification of Germany which took place under the skillful maneuvering of Chancellor Bismarck with Wilhelm I crowned as the first Kaiser of the German Empire on 21 January 1871. With central Europe united into two major powers—Italy and Germany, there arose many more equations leading to conflicting politics of various kinds. Between 1871 and 1890 there was a marked supremacy of unified Germany over Europe. France never liked this German hegemony and began to carve out her own position which led to further politics of both shrewd and subversive natures. This prompted Bismarck to etch out another treaty entitled The Three Emperors' League, or *Dreikaiserbund*, to isolate France—leading to an alliance between the German Empire, the Russian Empire and Austria-Hungary. This was renewed for three years in June 1881, but at its expiry in 1884—no further renewal could be reached and diplomatically Russia moved closer to France. This was the genesis of the subsequent Franco-Russian Alliance in 1894. It is assumed by many that the dissolution of the Three Emperors' League took Europe a step closer to the First World War. To sum it up we may say that throughout almost whole of Europe growing efforts had been seen in the second half of the nineteenth century for carving out new national identities, which brought in radical changes in the map of Europe with no apparent stability to bring any sustained order in the continent. Outbreak of the First Great war may be attributed to this prolonged uncertainty.

This history also helps us to understand Vivekananda's work in England, and throws a little light on his prophetic utterance at the

Triplicane Literary Society, Madras, in February 1897: 'The whole of the Western world is on a volcano which may burst tomorrow, go to pieces tomorrow.'<sup>8</sup>

Later, when the Sister would come up with a few facets of the world history to negate the ill imposed inferiority on India, we shall be reminded of her knowledge of the above past.

### **The Meeting**

Apparently Nivedita was no different from those present in that West End drawing room on that cold November afternoon of 1895; for none of them was too orthodox or open to belief. Later we knew from her that those who had been invited to attend were 'singled out ... on the very score of our unwillingness to believe, for the difficulty of convincing us of the credibility of religious propaganda in general.'<sup>9</sup> But despite their stoic facade, an initial curiosity obviously ruled the gathering. For the very name 'Swami Vivekananda' had always commanded that concern wherever he went in the West, and when people sat before him—almost everything ceased to matter. Let us see what followed.

No, Nivedita was not overwhelmed by what she came upon in that first meet. Her initial expression, echoing the others, had been: 'It was not new' (ibid.). But with slight passage of time, the impact of her experience made inroad to her receptive mind. She resolved to hear Swamiji again. For, as she declared: 'It had never before fallen to my lot to meet with a thinker who in one short hour had been able to express all that I had hitherto regarded as highest and best' (1.21). She took note as well of what she heard in the succeeding lectures and kept on reading them afterwards. She writes about the growing impact: 'The feeling that great music wakes in us, grows and deepens with its repetition' (ibid.). The first meet took place when Swamiji first visited

London. Within a few months he revisited London, and Nivedita continued to attend his lectures as before. This time she conversed with him as well. The gradual change of her mind is betrayed in her writing: 'The time came, before the Swami left England, when I addressed him as "Master". I had recognised the heroic fibre of the man, and desired to make myself the servant of his love for his own people. But it was his *character* to which I had thus done obeisance' (1.22).

Nivedita took no great time to leave everything behind, which till then gave meaning and dimensions to her life. But here and there she left us remarkable insights into how the Swami revealed his plans to her:

It was in the course of a conversation ... that he turned to me and said, 'I have plans for the women of my own country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me,' and I knew that I had heard a call which would change my life. What these plans were, I did not know, and the effort of abandoning the accustomed perspective was for the moment so great that I did not care to ask. But I had already gathered that there was much to learn, if one's conception of the world were to be made inclusive of the viewpoint of foreign peoples (1.35).

Elsewhere she added further: 'It was as the apostle of Hinduism, not as a worker for India, that we saw the Swami in the West. "Oh how calm," he exclaimed, "would be the work of one, who really understood the divinity of man! For such, there is nothing to do, save to open men's eyes. All the rest does itself." And out of some such fathomless peace had come all that we had seen and heard of him' (1.38).

History is indebted to a close friend of Nivedita who later wrote what exactly happened before she travelled to India:

The popular presentation of Christianity lost its appeal to her and thus, when Swami Vivekananda arrived in London, she responded to his

call as a harp responds to the touch of a master-player. ... It is true, however, that, when the time came for her consideration of leaving for India and devoting herself and her ability to the cause there, she experienced a very natural hesitancy. With the present writer she frequently referred to reasons for and against the proposal. If she went to India with that purpose, she must trust others to cherish her aging mother; she must relinquish all those interests for which London claimed her and for which she was endowed with peculiar fitness. Above all, she must endure harsh mis-interpretation of her motive, and suspicion and disapproval on the part of the majority of her Christian connections.<sup>10</sup>

Today we hardly could measure the plight of her young heart—distressed with emotions rarely experienced by ordinary mortals. What finally came out is also narrated by her friend in loving words:

On the other hand, she realised that ‘the call had come to her’, with clarion sound. It abode with her. It rang in her hearing through the hours and through the days. Finally, not without intense spiritual struggle, she accepted the inevitable renunciation, and, in a phrase, ‘burnt her boats’; burnt them, because she was assured that, whatever might occur, she could never return to the old home, the old ways, the old familiar friends, except perhaps for an occasional brief vacation from the work to which she would wed herself (557).

The responsibility of her Ruskin School at Wimbledon went to her sister May Noble.

### **A Journey Unrivalled**

We have here a picture of Nivedita when she sailed for India:

Her portrait, at the period of her sailing, shows us a young but distinctive woman with luminous grey-blue eyes, with hair of light golden brown, with a complexion radiant in its clearness; with a smile ingratiating and alluring. Of

medium height; alert in every muscle and movement; eager, enterprising, dauntless. She derived from, and was proud of, Irish ancestry, and, generous, impulsive, ardent, she embodied much of the charm, the power of ready speech, the fascination of the Celt at his best. All this she carried from the Emerald Isle, by way to England, to India, the home of her adoption (558).

The *Brahmavadin* of 1 March 1898 had this news: ‘The departure of Miss Noble, from Wimbledon for India, gave occasion for the gathering together of a large number of friends who gladly seized this opportunity of saying farewell to her and bidding her “God Speed.” ... Though she left Wimbledon early in the morning, and on an extremely cold and foggy morning too, friends assembled for a last good-bye at the station.’<sup>11</sup>

At London’s Tilbury Dock Nivedita was waved off by her mother, sister and brother; among the friends present at the dock were Ebenezer Cooke and Octavius Beatty. Her ship reached Madras on 24 January 1898. On 28, she was received at the Calcutta port by Swamiji. Thus had begun her new life, and with it began a new set of activities which soon engulfed Nivedita with engagements utterly unknown to her before. Referring to her, the *Indian Mirror* on 8 February 1898 wrote: ‘We are glad to learn that she intends to start an organisation, under the patronage of Swami Vivekananda, for educating Hindu girls in an orthodox Hindu style. Arrangements will be made for imparting practical religious training to the girls’ (203).

On 7 March next she delivered her first public lecture at the Star Theatre entitled ‘Influence of the Spiritual Thoughts of India in England’. This was followed by her initiation by the Swami as a novice of the Order of Ramakrishna on 25 March 1898—on this occasion she was given the Name—Nivedita, meaning thereby ‘the Dedicated’. From this day onward till the Swami



breathed his last at the Belur Monastery on 4 July 1902—Nivedita's life had remained engaged in various activities spanning spiritual, educational, social, and organisational work of many kinds, of which her three leading biographies wrote in details. Here we would like to skip those happening beyond a few sketchy incidents, and focus a little more on when Swamiji was no more.

### ***The Turning Point***

Swamiji's intense concern for Indian education system with special stress on that of the women is well known. Following the religious parliament he remained in Chicago for about two months to study American social systems and pick out measures that could be made useful to his own country. He visited the Cook County Normal School of Colonel Parker, which played a great role in the early days of American Pedagogy. Swamiji also closely interacted with Josephine Locke, supervisor of art in the Chicago Public Schools, who later became the Curator of the Art Institute of Chicago. This was why when he first saw Nivedita, it had been his idea for a school for the girls in Calcutta which first surfaced in his mind; though he might have thought of utilising her as well for opening a monastery for women in India. In the Bengali biography of Sister Nivedita, Pravrajika Muktiprana has referred to this aspect in a very convincing manner. She wrote that since the period was not congenial to implement this idea of Swamiji, it had to wait for years when Nivedita was no more. But Nivedita, with her idealistic life, exemplary renunciation, and implementation of various activities in the newly opened girls' school in Calcutta, which later was renamed after her, virtually gave birth to the monastery for women Swamiji had in mind. Today it is a well-accepted fact that the Sister Nivedita Girls' School in Calcutta is verily the birthplace of the Sri Sarada Math.

Since the beginning, Nivedita never kept herself confined to the work of her school alone. She participated wholeheartedly in the Mission's relief work at various places, utilized her writing skills to prepare pamphlets, booklets or sending letters and articles to leading newspapers and journals, and so on. Another significant development took place when she began to live at Bose Para Lane, first at 16 and later moving to 17, in Calcutta—where she was continuously visited by eminent Indians in the fields of education, science, literature, art, politics, and so on, who afterwards played vital roles in the history of India. They all were admirers of the Sister and came to get themselves enriched and inspired by her brilliant knowledge, personality, and intellect.

Three distinct happenings had obvious impact on Nivedita and what she did afterwards. The first was the North India tour that she went with Swamiji in early May of 1898. Mrs Ole Bull and Josephine MacLeod and others also accompanied. The tour continued for a little over six months touching places like Almora, Nainital, Kashmir, and Amarnath. The recorded experience of Nivedita reads:

Fain, if I could, would I describe our journeys. Even as I write I see the irises in bloom at Bara-mulla; the young rice beneath the poplars at Islamabad; starlight scenes in Himalayan forests; and the royal beauties of Delhi and the Taj. One longs to attempt some memorial of these. It would be worse than useless. Not, then, in words, but in the light of memory they are enshrined forever, together with the kindly and gentle folk who dwell among them and whom we trust always to have left the gladder for our coming. ... Seated under a tree in the garden of dead emperors there came to us a vision of all the rich and splendid things of Earth, offering themselves as a shrine for the great of soul. The storied windows of cathedrals and the jewelled thrones of kings, the banners of great captains

and the vestments of the priests, the pageants of cities and the retreats of the proud—all came and all were rejected.<sup>12</sup>

In her diary she kept records of how everywhere things instantly thrived with life by the ceaseless flow of Swami's words. So this was how, in the vast arena of simple Indian life and landscape, Nivedita's wonderful receptive mind imbibed the alphabets with which she would thenceforth decipher the country she so lovingly had adopted as her own.

The second occasion was when she accompanied Vivekananda aboard the *S S Golconda* while the Swami went to his second and final visit to the West. This voyage, from Calcutta to London's Tilbury port, took forty-two days. Referring to those days aboard the ship, she writes:

To this voyage of six weeks I look back as the greatest occasion of my life. I missed no opportunity of the Swami's society that presented itself, and accepted practically no other, filling up the time with quiet writing and needle-work; thus I received one long continuous impression of his mind and personality, for which I can never be sufficiently thankful. ... From the beginning of the voyage to the end, the flow of thought and story went on. One never knew what moment would see the flash of intuition, and hear the ringing utterance of some fresh truth.<sup>13</sup>

But the Sister had another reason for remaining all ears to Swamiji. Her words tell us: 'I listened with an anxious mind, striving to treasure up each word that he let fall. For I knew that here I was but the transmitter, but the bridge, between him and that countless host of his own people, who would yet arise, and seek to make good his dreams' (1.138).

The third occasion had been when Nivedita was in Chicago imparting lectures in various places before people to arouse interest in funding her school in Calcutta. In fact this was why she had accompanied the Swami to the West.

But the response she received in this regard was much below of what she had hoped for. On 13 March 1900 she wrote to Swamiji, who was then in California:

Long years ago in England, in the year I first met you, Norman Wyld ... told me that if I could only know Prof. Geddes, to whom he was proud to be disciple, my soul would be saved, and my attitude to Life determined forever. *This* function however was performed by someone else! Yet all the time in Kashmir I used to tell S. Sara [Mrs Bull] and Yum Yum [Josephine Macleod] of this man and of the claim Norman had made for him—that he was the first sociologist since Spencer to produce a new and living theory of society with a future in it.<sup>14</sup>

It was a comparatively long letter with various facts centering Prof. Patrick Geddes and what he thought and did.

The Professor was then on a lecture tour in America with his wife when Nivedita met him in Chicago, and this added impetus to her ambitions. This had prompted the Leggett family to invite the Professor and his wife to be their houseguest in New York. What followed is also available in the letter we just have quoted. But her enthusiasm hardly remained confined in her letter. Professor Geddes had been entrusted to organise numerous sessions of the International Association for the Advancement of Science, Arts, and Education at the Paris Exposition. In Nivedita he found a brilliant mind eager to absorb his thoughts and ideals; and her high intellect and brilliance were taken into account as well. Nivedita was also eager to associate herself with the Professor and learn her lessons. Therefore those two mutually attracted minds did what was expected of them. The Professor invited Nivedita to join him in Paris to assist in his work at the Exposition. Nivedita readily agreed and sailed for Paris from New York on 28th June. Vivekananda had also been in New York at this



*Francis H Leggett and Betty Leggett*

time and he sailed for Paris on 26 July 1900.

It was Prof. Geddes who, besides Swami Vivekananda, had influenced Nivedita most in her thinking and assimilation of various ideas centering civilisation, society, and flow of human life. She desired to learn more from the Professor to understand India a little better to bring sustained benefit to the nation and its people; for she knew, or rather assumed, that it would surely be approved by Swamiji, who always preferred steady and permanent change without disturbing the traditional mores of his ancient nation. His approach, as he himself had categorically said, was root and branch reform. Sister knew it too, for later on she wrote:

The Swami felt that there was no task before India which could compare in importance with that of woman's education. His own life had had two definite personal purposes, of which

one had been the establishment of a home for the Order of Ramakrishna, while the other was the initiation of some endeavour towards the education of woman. With five hundred men, he would say, the conquest of India might take fifty years: with as many women, not more than a few weeks.<sup>15</sup>

Nivedita was brought from the West to look after the second ambition of Swamiji; it all more or less went well till she met Professor Geddes, who was a visionary with a combination of academic excellence and genius. Even Rabindranath Tagore once said about him: 'He has the precision of the scientist, and at the same time the vision of the prophet. He has also the power of an artist to make his ideas visible through the language of symbol.'<sup>16</sup> But even before she met Prof. Geddes, Nivedita interacted with Peter Kropotkin; such interactions grew more when



she visited England in early 1900. The impact of Kropotkin on her is visible when, after acknowledging the contributions of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, she writes that, 'King of modern sociologists is perhaps Kropotkin.'<sup>17</sup> But of course such influences of Geddes and Kropotkin were in degree and depth much different with that of Swamiji. Whatever new and impressive ideas came in her way, she always tested it in the light of the Swami's life and teachings. For those novel ideas and tools after all were to have the unipolar aim—bring good to India and her people.

But despite their earnest wish to work together, within three weeks it proved to be a disaster. In all apparentness it was a case of misplaced individual expectations that brought this outcome. But notwithstanding the adverse consequence of their first venture, an enduring relationship continued till Nivedita breathed her last. In many of her letters we find her expression of deep gratitude about how she had benefitted from her association with Prof. Geddes. But at the outset this association, followed by her prolonged stay till the beginning of 1902 in the West, which was punctuated with travels and close interactions with great many brilliant minds of Europe, gave a new dimension to what she earlier was doing in India. Besides, her stay in England this time with firsthand knowledge of what her countrymen were really doing in India, gave her a two pronged motive. The first was to involve herself at par with the Indian people in freeing themselves from the British subjugation; the second, to fight against the deceptions of the British administration in what they preached in their own country with what they really did in India.

True, there were times when it had become difficult to follow what was exactly in her mind while she was extending her stay in London for one reason or other. Even doubts began to rise whether she would ever return to India again or

not. Finally she boarded the India bound ship from Marseilles on 9 January 1902. Dr Romesh Chandra Dutt and Mrs Ole Bull were accompanying her.

### Homecoming

Immediately on her return to India Nivedita was accorded a warm welcome at the Madras Mahajana Sabha. A part of her lecture there in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of 8 February 1902 reads: 'It has been my unspeakable privilege to know some of the greatest men that modern India has produced. Of one well-known to you [Swamiji] it is not my place to speak, since a daughter cannot be permitted to offer praise before the world to her own father. Her whole life is, in that case, her best offering.'<sup>18</sup> Pravrajika Muktiprana wrote that this lecture had clear hints as to the mindset with which the Sister landed on the shores of India, and there were no reason for the British to accept her as their friend. So when she reached Calcutta, instructions were issued to keep surveillance both on her and her correspondences.

From 9th February Nivedita began to live at 17 Bose Para Lane, which was adjacent to her previous one at 16, where she earlier lived and opened her school on 13 November 1898. She took immediate control of her school and began to run it again with same love and concern quite unique to her. However, two incidents in 1902, taking place in quick succession, influenced Nivedita most. In April 1898 Christine Greenstidel, more popularly known as Sister Christine, came from Detroit to serve the cause of the Swami. She found her place in Nivedita's school and began to live with her at 17 Bose Para Lane. Her wholehearted devotion and active involvement in the school had allowed great relief to Nivedita in pursuing what drew her most at that time. In some of the letters of Nivedita the role Sister Christine played in this regard is explicitly

acknowledged. Though the former never kept hers aloof or distanced from what went on in the school.

The second incident, devastating in nature and impact, took a little less than six months to befall her since she came back from the West. On 4 July Swamiji left his mortal frame. Everything went into a turmoil. But as mostly happens—a great disaster first leads to chaotic imbalances before things finally settle on their own in a new array—and the world moves on. So was the occasion to the Order of Ramakrishna when Swamiji was no more, Nivedita was no exception to this. In immediate fallout she had to sever her official link with the Order. A newspaper insertion in the *Indian Mirror* of 22 July 1902 reads: ‘Sister Nivedita begs us to inform the public that, at the conclusion of the days of mourning for the Swami Vivekananda, it has been decided between the members of the Order at Bellur Math and herself, that her work shall henceforth be regarded as free, and entirely independent of their sanction and authority’ (225).

A few days before he left this earth, we know, Swamiji had made it explicit to Nivedita that she would have to select whether to continue with the ideals of the Order, or pursue her activities tinged with political aspirations. But today history has made it clear that notwithstanding the official severance of her connection with the Order of the monks, her links with both the monks and the Order remained ever undying. In numerous projects which asked for her experience and competence, the Mission never hesitated in associating themselves with the Sister. Proofs are many, but those hardly concern us here.

### **The Expanding Horizon**

It is not true that her nationalistic aspirations first grew when she returned from the West in early 1902. For much before that, her letter of 26

April [1899] reads: ‘I see that England’s course is not yet run here—but I LONG with all my heart for the day when it shall be. And I pray that I may be reincarnated to cry “Young India” when the time comes to snatch the country’s freedom from us, as the very youngest and earnest of recruits may have shouted by Mazzini’s side in the days of the freedom of Italy.’<sup>19</sup> Even when the Swami was there, the Bose Para Lane residence of the Sister was visited by distinguished personalities who would later involve themselves in shaping India and her history through science, education, literature, and politics. But the trend grew more when she moved to 17 Bosepara Lane. Among her admirers, to name a few, were Rabindranath Tagore, Dinesh Chandra Sen, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghose. Her role in furthering the ambition of Dr Jagadish Chandra Bose and allowing him to pursue his scientific experiments is well available in her letters. It’s amazing that once Rabindranath Tagore had asked her about the scientific aims and achievements of Dr Bose, which she gave in her letter of 18 April 1903.

Among people who lived close to Swamiji, Nivedita had the rarest ability to assimilate and interpret his message and teachings to a great extent. Swamiji too, perhaps sometime during his second visit to the West, realised that notwithstanding her attachment and love to his cause, Nivedita’s towering energy and ability, multiplied manifold by his inspiration and teachings, were gradually making her more concerned with the political aspirations of India. But he neither had the time nor the inclination to steer his beloved daughter any more. He gave her a unique blessing while Nivedita was leaving him in a coastal village in Brittany before journeying to England in the last week of September 1900. Taking cue from the peculiar practice of a Mohammedan sect when they blessed

their newborns, Swamiji said: 'Go forth into the world and there, if I made you, be destroyed! If Mother made you, live!'<sup>20</sup> We know Nivedita lived, and lived magnificently for India, disowning every thought of her personal concern.

Before this blessing came, on 4 June 1900 Nivedita wrote to Josephine MacLeod revealing her experience of attending a lecture by the Swami in New York: 'This man who stood there held my life in the hollow of his hand—and as he once in a while look my way, I read in his glance what I too felt in my own heart, complete faith and abiding comprehension of purpose—better than any feeling.'<sup>21</sup>

Just about a year later, her letter to Josephine from Norway on 10 June 1901 reads:

Freedom has meant something to me, for my life has come to include many elements that Swami would probably not have put there. ... I see the political need so clearly too! ... I believe now that I have something to do for grown-up India and for Indian men. How I shall be allowed to do that something, is Mother's business, not mine (1.432).

Her growing concern for India became more explicit in her letter to Josephine on 19th July: 'About India ... I feel as if I had something now that *no one* ever had before' (1.434). In this very letter Nivedita gave away her own viewpoint and pointed out where it differed with the Swami's:

Perhaps my very ignorance and want of depth is my best weapon. Not that I do not think Swami's is the master word and for all time. I do think that—but I see with terrible distinctness that it is *too* big for any one generation. It needs a point. ... Oh! India! India! Who shall undo this awful doing of my nation to you? Who shall atone for *one* of the million bitter insults showered daily on the bravest and keenest, nerved and best of all your sons? ... We want the very dust of the Earth to carry our message for us (1.434–6).

The importance of this letter could hardly be overemphasised, for here the Sister, before disclosing her immediate plan for India, referred an incident she read in a book:

A man called Johnson ... was holding Nashville when a brother-officer determined to withdraw the garrison—and this man said—"I'm not a religious man, but I do believe in GOD Almighty and I do believe in the Bible and I'll be damned if Nashville surrenders!" What a man! Oh that India had a few like him! Well, well, well, have a try yet! I particularly want to go to Poona.<sup>22</sup>

This takes us to the first act of revolutionary nationalism in British India when in Pune on 22 June 1897 Damodar Chapekar and his brother Balkrishna Chapekar killed Walter Rand, the British Plague Commissioner, and Lieutenant Ayerst, a British officer. Soon after Swamiji's demise, Nivedita travelled to Western and Southern India and gave lectures everywhere. While in Pune, she went to the mother of the Chapekar brothers to pay her respect and express deep compassion. The succeeding history is available here:

The arrest, trial and the hanging of the Chapekar brothers in 1898 did not go in vain, and their line of action seemed to have impressed the Mitra Mela—the group that was led by V.D. Savarkar in 1900 in Nasik—which in 1904 turned into Abhinava Bharat. Two years earlier in the far flung Bengal, a barrister (Pramatha Nath Mitra) under the hypnosis of the cult of European secret societies, a local physical culture enthusiast (Satish Bose) in touch with Sister Nivedita, Swami Vivekananda's famed Irish disciple, and an expatriate (Jatindranath Bannerji) in the service of the Baroda State Army, came together to establish the Calcutta Anushilan Samiti—the progenitor of the two main groups of revolutionists in Bengal, namely, the Anushilan and the Jugantar.<sup>23</sup>

A noted historian writes: 'Nivedita was astounded to find the [Chapekars'] mother



completely self-composed, unruffled and serene.<sup>24</sup> The same historian, in summing up the contribution of Nivedita, writes:

Between Vivekananda's death in July 1902 and the beginning of the Swadeshi Movement in August 1905, Sister Nivedita ... did much to foster the new spirit of national awakening. In 1900 she wrote a booklet, *Kali the Mother*, which Aurobindo described as 'inspiring and full of rebel spirit.' In 1904 appeared her famous book *The Web of Indian Life* in which she expounded the philosophy of nationalism. S.K. Ratcliffe, one time editor of *The Statesman* rightly observed: 'The influences that have gone into the shaping of the New India are still obscure; but this may be said with complete assurance that among them all there has been no single factor that has surpassed, or equaled the character, and life and words of Sister Nivedita (76).

### **The Crux of Her Mission**

When it concerned India, Nivedita always preached and inspired the message of unity. Her role in the Swadeshi Movement, the genesis of all that followed in latter-day freedom struggles, had too many facets to accommodate here. The movement began when the British made the partition proposal for Bengal publicly known in December 1903. Spontaneous agitations erupted in no time. Unfazed, the English government went on with their scheme; the partition was announced in 19 July 1905, which took effect on 16 October 1905. Thus began the Swadeshi Movement. In its wake came the proposal for boycotting foreign goods—aimed to put economic pressure on Britain. This led to a discord between the Moderates and the Extremists in Benares Congress of 1905. The Extremists were in favour of spreading the boycott beyond Bengal to stir up an immediate nationwide Swaraj movement. This was not what the former had in mind. It was largely Nivedita,

who could bring the two disagreeing forces of Indian politics, the Moderates and the Extremists, to come together at the Benares Congress and etch out a unanimous policy in furthering the movement. In fact according to Abdul Rasul, President of Barisal Conference in April 1906: 'What we could not have accomplished in 50 or 100 years, the great disaster, the partition of Bengal, has done for us in six months. Its fruits have been the great national movement known as the Swadeshi movement.'<sup>25</sup>

Three months before the Benares Congress begun, Nivedita wrote these rejoicing words to Gokhale, then *en route* to England, on 20 September 1905:

The Boycott meanwhile is spreading even to women and priests—and the amount of sacrifice that has been made is extraordinary. I always feel that by this particular power of unknown people to perform obscure acts of sacrifice under a dominating Idea of the Community, you can exactly measure the national potentiality.<sup>26</sup>

With a few lines in between on how such power in the past did and undid great things in the West, Nivedita began again:

And it was this power that a few months ago seemed unborn amongst us. Today it is seen on all sides. This is the element of hope—that outshines all others. Even petty shopkeepers are found to remonstrate with Indian customers who ask for a *videshi* commodity! (ibid.).

We shall later see when Gokhale would visit England for the third time he would carry three letters of introduction from the Sister to meet key personalities. But now in this very letter, when Gokhale was going to England for the second time, Nivedita warned him with helpful words:

I hope you will not be shut up, while you are in England, amongst a few saintly and exquisite

persons, but that you will have the chance of judging my people as they really are—often blood-thirsty—always money-thirsty—degraded by unjust wars and rapidly losing hold of the things that were of old the glory of the English name (ibid.).

We shall shortly come across similar unkind but insightful words on her countrymen in her writings in the *Modern Review*.

But what could be averted in Benares became a reality in the succeeding years when the Moderates had to yield to the Extremists in the Surat Congress of 1907. Till Mahatma Gandhi entered the Indian Politics, this phase continued till 1920. To know how the Sister kept herself involved with the ongoing movements in this phase, we may look into what Ramananda Chatterjee of *Modern Review*, acknowledged as the father of Indian journalism, wrote:

She was a pronounced nationalist ... though her political opinions were quite radical and definite. She could never forgive partisanship or faction fights in Indian politics or journalism, she believed in the great need and efficacy of our presenting a united front. ... The promotion of the cause of nationality was with her a mission and a passion, as was women's education.<sup>27</sup>

Her message always remained clear and inspiring: 'We are working comrades *because we are Indians*, children of a single-roof tree, dwellers around one bamboo clump. Our task is one, the rebuilding of Heroic India.'<sup>28</sup> With this aim in view, she began to teach us all that we once knew but forgot to embrace the century-long misfortunes. She wanted to unite all under the common bond of nationality, which, as she said: '... will consist in the harmonious working of all those different movements and

organizations operating, on different lines, towards one supreme end—the good of the nation' (5.150).

Gopal Krishna Gokhale had always enjoyed Nivedita's friendship and support. His feelings towards her were also reciprocal. On 14 April 1906 he went to London for the third time to meet John Morley, the Secretary of State. He carried with him Nivedita's letters of introduction to three illustrious men—William Stead, the editor of the *Review of Reviews*, Frederick Harrison, English author and exponent of Comte's Positivism, and Prince Kropotkin, the exiled revolutionary and anarchist. Her sole aim in directing Gokhale to those three men, along with two more whose names were also mentioned in her letter of 11 April 1906, had the single aim—to aid Gokhale in furthering the cause of India.

If we look at the period beyond the Surat Congress, we shall see that the split in the Congress and the growing British repressions everywhere on the agitators gradually weakened the Swadeshi Movement by the middle of 1908. Besides, between 1907 and 1908 leading leaders of Bengal

*Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Bipin Chandra Pal*



including Ashwini Kumar Dutta and Krishna Kumar Mitra were deported. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was sentenced for six years imprisonment, Ajit Singh and Lala Lajpat Rai were deported, Chidambaram Pillai and Harisarvottam Rao from Madras and Andhra were arrested. Bipin Chandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh retired from active politics. So with such unfriendly scenario the movement could hardly be sustained. But the declining movement welcomed another phase in the Swadeshi—the rise of revolutionary terrorism. It was not till 1914, when Tilak was released to lead the movement again.<sup>29</sup>

During the period we just have discussed, Nivedita maintained her link with the freedom struggle, contributed articles and booklets while analyzing, inspiring, and directing the struggles. Even her association with a few revolutionary publications was also talked about. She had twice been to the West again—in August 1907, remaining there for two years; and in October 1910, when Sara Bull's serious illness suddenly took her to the US, after visiting England for the last time, she returned in April 1911. According to Sankari Prasad Basu, it was political compulsion which made the Sister leave India in 1907.<sup>30</sup> Once she even hinted her wish to live at Chandannagore, the then French Colony and beyond the clutch of the British Police. To find out an unspoken history, we may see what the Sister, while *en route* to England, wrote to S K Ratcliffe of the *Statesman* on 14 December 1910:

I am travelling incog. [*incognito*] as Mrs. Theta Margot, and have got quite used to my new signature! Not only are the newspapers gagged as you know—but in Courts of law *all* that is said is neither reported nor recorded! Thus there is no hope. Of course underground forces are gathering—but what strength are they likely to have? It does really look like lambs against wolves! All these modern cities, with their buried forms of exploitation—from end to end of

India, and all these childlike people, with their English schools teaching them meaningless formulae, and Japan looking on, hungry—what hope is there?<sup>31</sup>

## 2

Nivedita's concern for India was not restricted to gaining freedom from British tyranny. She knew where the malady exactly was, and how to fight against its creeping influence. She relentlessly spoke, wrote, and did everything possible to make the Indians aware of their own greatness and stand on their own without imitating the West. She drew our reluctant gaze to our own history, art, science, and the illimitable wealth of literature—mythologies included; she went on to reinterpret everything in an altogether unknown positivity. It was Nivedita who, while inspiring the whole nation to unite and stand free, did not forget to remind: 'It requires a foreign eye to catch the wonders of Indian solidarity. It was Englishmen who first saw that our unity was so great, and our ignorance of that unity so universal, that an immense harvest might be reaped from administering our affairs and taxing us, as a unit.'<sup>32</sup> But she knew that even with this knowledge from the English, people were not aware of the steps to be adhered to for bringing the needed changes. So she began to steer the people as best as she could. Let us see a little of how she made that possible.

In a writing highlighting the achievements of Dr J C Bose in January 1902, Nivedita reminded the nation's predominantly Europe-centric intelligentsia:

Modern science is not a flight beyond the scope of our old Indian intellect. All the resources of a twentieth century laboratory combined, serve only to demonstrate that the work of our fathers was of the first quality. The fact that India today has produced a man equal to repeating the old



achievement, proves that we have still the capacity to do our fathers' work (5.268).

But it was hardly an end in itself to eulogise Dr Bose, proof is in what the sister added immediately: 'Why, then, should Jagdish Chander Bose stand alone? What he has done, hundreds of our boys may yet succeed in emulating, for the quality of work displayed is a national quality' (ibid.). Here space hardly permits us a relook into her galvanising words touching almost all areas of India's inherent greatness, which she uttered or wrote from her deep conviction to arouse the nation, the sleeping leviathan. But in essence, while contrasting India with the West and pointing out merits and demerits prevailing in both, she writes: 'Let the Indian millions once arrive at a simple, united idea of what they need and mean to have, nothing in the world could resist them. ... Ours is only to recognize the significance of causes, leaving results to take care of themselves' (5.174). And to achieve this she suggested the need of 'self-organisation', substituting the oft-used word in those days—'Regeneration'. She never thought that India needed regeneration. But neither for a moment she ever thought of blocking the best from the West; her direction was clear: 'Interchange of the highest ideals—never their contrasting, to the disadvantage of either—was the motto of our great Captain [Swamiji], and the wisdom of this ought to be easily set forth' (5.68).

To free the people from their ill-conceived idea about the superiority of the West, Nivedita often referred to the lesser known angles of history: 'England has already lost her footing in Industry as in agriculture. Though doubtless the truth of her position is temporarily masked by her grip upon the imperial markets. Germany with her greater respect for the bearing of science upon technology, and France, with her agricultural civilization and fair distribution

of economic means, are both far in advance of England' (5.164). She defines English people as 'a single tribe whose tribal jealousy is such that they could not amalgamate with the Irish or the Welsh and have only partially done so with the Scotch, because the latter are better traders than themselves' (174).

The webpage of the National Gallery of Modern Art reads:

The nationalist project in art was led by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and some enlightened Europeans such as EB Havell, the principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta from 1896, and Sister Nivedita, an associate of Swami Vivekananda. Moving away from oil painting and subjects that were popular with both the British and Indian intelligentsia, Abanindranath looked to ancient murals and medieval Indian miniatures for inspiration both for subject matter as well as indigenous material such as tempera. ... They sought to develop an indigenous yet modern style in art as a response to the call for 'swadeshi' to express Indian themes in a pictorial language that deliberately turned away from western styles such as those practiced by Raja Ravi Varma.<sup>33</sup>

Now a few words from an illustrious pupil of Abanindranath:

[Lady Herringham] travelled to India with two assistants, Miss Dorothy Larcher and Miss Luke, arriving here in December 1909. Sister Nivedita who had taken a keen interest in this project of resuscitating the murals wanted that some Indian painters should benefit by such studies too. As one of the active associates of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, she prevailed on the Society to sponsor Nandalal and Asitkumar for copying assignments under Lady Herringham. Sister was a resolute woman and after arranging for their travel tickets and incidental needs, she sent them to Ajanta. The expenses on their account were borne by Abanindranath and Gaganendranath. Nandalal and Asitkumar

reached Ajanta and joined Lady Herringham's team there. The Nizam's government had arranged for their lodging and security. Ajanta, in those days was a remote hill area far away from urban centres. The forests around were not without wild fauna. This necessitated guards at the caves and at the camping sites. Nandalal was overwhelmed at the very first sight by the profound beauty of these murals. ...

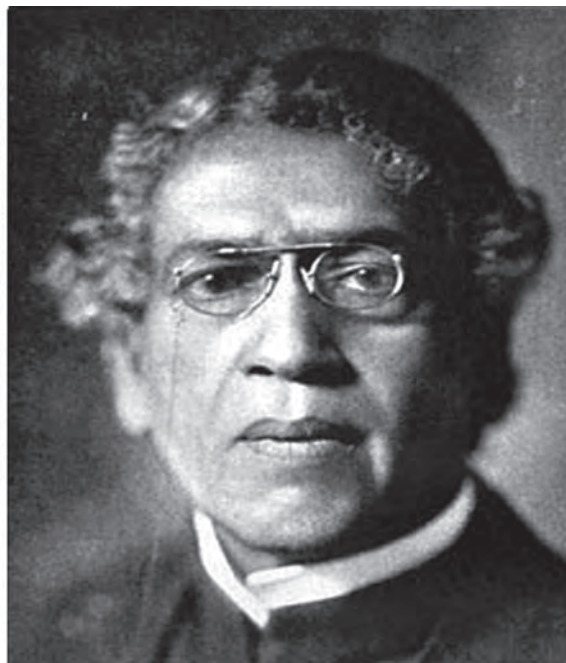
During Christmas week Sister Nivedita accompanied by the Scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, Abala Bose and Ganen Brahmachari visited the Ajanta Camp and made enquiries about their food and comforts. The Sister left behind Ganen Brahmachari popularly known as Maharaj, to look after the arrangements.<sup>34</sup>

At the memorial meeting for Sister Nivedita at Calcutta Town Hall on 23 March 1912 Abanindranath, the man who lead the Bengal School, read a paper; we prefer to quote here an excerpt from the *Modern Review* of April 1912: 'Babu Abanindranath Tagore read a paper in Bengali, pointing out how she had opened the eyes of the

Indians to the beautiful in their country, their own art and their own institutions.'<sup>35</sup>

We must remember that all her above involvements were beyond the relief works she attended to; her extensive travels which she purposely undertook to read and realize India; and the extreme health hazards which on occasions kept her bed-ridden for prolonged periods. Besides, today the wealth of her writings constitutes no less than five volumes. The major portion which later took shape in some of her immortal books—*The Web of Indian Life* (1904), *Cradle Tales of Hinduism* (1907), *The Master As I Saw Him* (1910), *Notes of Some Wanderings with the Swami in the Himalayas*, posthumously in 1913, and *Footfalls of Indian History*, posthumously in 1915—were all written beyond 1900. Moreover, from early 1907 she began to write uninterruptedly for the *Modern Review*, and the publications continued even when she was no more. Apart from this there were articles for the *Statesman* and

Lady Abala and Dr Jagadish Chandra Bose



various other journals and papers which are too numerous to include here.

Incidentally, Swami Saradananda had the opportunity of observing Nivedita almost throughout her stay in India. With due regard to all her great deeds and their multiplicity, he always found her greatness more in the little things she did in her daily life, which were basically beyond the common knowledge of people at large. In those works, she shared the gloom and glory of her neighbours, risked her life to save seriously ill people from death with least concern to her own life, and underwent great hardship to provide financial or other assistance to people in distress. Her all out participation in relief work among villagers struck by famine, according to Saradananda, was no less a sign of her great soul. And ahead of everything else he placed her silent toil to create a genuine love for education in the hearts of Indian women, and putting her precious times for long to pass on its fruits to a few eager aspirants in the not so famous locality in contemporary Calcutta.

### Epilogue

Nivedita could never escape a dilemma, causing her inescapable remorse, that perhaps she failed her Master. Her letter to Mrs Ole Bull on 12 December 1906 reads:

When I think what Swamiji planned that my life should be, and how different I have made it, I feel utterly broken-hearted. ... But there seems no path for me here, except silence and submission—even in matter[s] where I feel an overwhelming need to choose my own path and assert my own ideal. But oh! Am I betraying a trust? Am I? Am I? Who can answer that for me?<sup>36</sup>

In many of her letters to Mrs Bull and Josephine MacLeod we come across similar anguish in varied expressions; though in some of them we also

find a resolute woman diligently pursuing her duties to enlighten and enrich a country she had made her own. Nonetheless, we tend to believe today that howsoever tormenting had been her vacillation between what she did, and what she construed as remaining neglected—the choice never belonged to her.

Swamiji was an epitome of freedom. But he was a prophet; political freedom always came next to his greatest plan—man-making. He brought Nivedita as a capable worker for that work. But his pangs for the country's subjugation had always been there; the tyranny of the foreign ruler always ringed deep down his heart. And outbursts were not absent. An American who met the Swami even before the Religious Parliament begun writes: 'At times he even expressed a great longing that the English government would take him and shoot him. "It would be the first nail in their coffin", he would say, with a little gleam of his white teeth, "and my death would run through the land like wild fire"'.<sup>37</sup>

Long afterwards, his letter to Mary Hale on 30 October 1899 betrayed the constant pain he carried with him:

For writing a few words of innocent criticism, men are being hurried to transportation for life, others imprisoned without any trial; and nobody knows when his head will be off. There has been a reign of terror in India for some years. English soldiers are killing our men and outraging our women—only to be sent home with passage and pension at our expense. We are in a terrible gloom ... Suppose you simply publish this letter—the law just passed in India will allow the English Government in India to drag me from here to India and kill me without trial.<sup>38</sup>

If we look into the history of the Indian Freedom Movement since its beginning, we hardly could find a leader who was not inspired



by Swami Vivekananda. Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of Independent India, once said: 'Men who lead their fellow beings in any sphere of life are rare and those that lead their leaders are rarest still. These super-guides come not very often upon this earth to uplift the sinking section of humanity. Swami Vivekananda was one of these super souls.'<sup>39</sup> It was not for nothing that the names of Swamiji and his Mission frequently came up in the records of the British Police.

But to Swamiji India was much beyond a mere country. Sister Christine writes:

Our love for India came to birth ... when we first heard him say the word, 'India', in that marvellous voice of his. It seems incredible that so much could have been put into one small word of five letters. There was love, passion, pride, longing, adoration, tragedy, chivalry, *heimweh*, and again love. Whole volumes could not have produced such a feeling in others. It had the magic power of creating love in those who heard it. Ever after, India became the land of heart's desire. Everything concerning her became of interest—became living—her people, her history, architecture, her manners and customs, her rivers, mountains, plains, her culture, her great spiritual concepts, her scriptures. And so began a new life, a life of study, of meditation. The centre of interest was shifted.<sup>40</sup>

Swamiji gave his best to Nivedita for his work. And in doing so, knowingly or not, he passed on his inestimable passion for India. Nivedita by nature was a social activist, occasions might have varied the inclinations—but in background had always been her deep sense of righteousness, and what is good for people. We have first seen this at Wrexham; a little later, when she offered herself to the cause of the 'Free Ireland' group, we knew that if the cause justified it, she had no abhorrence to politics.

Three more things drew her to the Indian

freedom struggle. First was her bitter experience in what her countrymen were doing in India. Second, in England she failed to earn the attention of English people in reversing the injustices done on India. Thirdly, to find a solution she began to discuss her problems with people like William Stead, Peter Kropotkin, and many more during her days in England in early 1900s. Eventually her mind took a definite turn before she sailed for India in early 1902.

Today, more than a hundred years since both Swamiji and Nivedita left the world, one may like to know what had lastly been the latter's bond with the former. The letter Swamiji wrote to Nivedita from Benares on 4 March 1902 is a testament in this regard. But some background has to be retold first. Despite her long desire to follow Swamiji to India, family obligations kept Christine Greenstidel tied to America. When she finally sailed to India, Swamiji had no more than a few months to live. He writes in his letter from Benares:

I can hardly sit up or write, yet still feel duty bound to write to you this letter, fearing lest it becomes my last, it may put others to trouble. ... I sent Christina [Greenstidel] £100 from Mrs. [Charlotte] Sevier for a travel to India, ... Her last letter informs me that she sails on February 15th. In that case, her reaching India is very near. ... In case I pass away, which I would like very much to do in this city of Shiva, do you open her letters directed to me, receive the girl, and send her back home. If she has no money to go back, give her a passage—even if you have to beg.<sup>41</sup>

Immediately on his return from his first visit to the West, Swamiji deputed Swami Ramakrishnananda to start a centre in Madras. Till almost the end of his life the latter remained there to do what was entrusted to him, this now constitutes the glorious history

of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement in southern and western India. Swamiji writes to Nivedita:

Ramakrishnananda came a few weeks before I came away, and the first thing he did was to lay down at my feet 400 Rs. he had collected in so many years of hard work!!! It was the first time such a thing has happened in my life. I can scarcely suppress my tears. Oh, Mother!! Mother! There is not all gratitude, all love, all manliness dead!!! And, dear child, one is enough—one seed is enough to reforest the world.

... Well, if I pass away, see that 400 Rs. is paid back—every rupee to him. Lord bless you and Ramakrishnananda.

I am quite satisfied with my work. To have left two true souls is beyond the ambition of the greatest (9.180–1).

There were many in Europe, America, and India, who in their tributes to Nivedita pointed out many of her great qualities. But in simplicity and, more so, relevance to what we discussed here, the views of Gopal Krsihna Gokhale, the father figure of Indian politics and acknowledged as the mentor of Mahatma Gandhi, merit a relook. According to him the Sister's personality was

so striking indeed, that to meet her was like coming in contact with some great force of nature. Her marvellous intellect, her lyric powers of expression, her great industry, the intensity with which she held her beliefs and convictions and last but not least, the truly great gift—capacity to see the soul of things straightway—all these would have made her a most remarkable woman of any time and in any country.<sup>42</sup>

Hers had been, Gokhale added, 'a love for India, that overflowed all bounds,' and empowered with such abounding love, 'passionate devotion to her interest,' 'utter self-surrender,'

and 'severe austerity of life'—he continued 'Sister Nivedita touched our imagination and captured our hearts or that she exercised a profound and far-reaching influence on the thoughts and ideas of those around her and that we acclaimed her as one of the greatest men and women that have lived and laboured for any land.' Today we know that the Sister's life had been in itself her tribute to India. But to which India she had identified herself with before paying such highest worship—Gokhale had the answer: 'She felt the fascination of India,' the 'completeness of her acceptance of India' was, Gokhale went on, 'not merely her acceptance of the great things for which India has stood in the past ... but of India as she is today with all her faults and shortcomings undeterred by the hardships or difficulties of our lives, unrepelled by our ignorance, superstition and even our squalor' (206–7). To these beautiful words we may add what the Sister once said in a lecture in 1902: 'I regret so deeply that I was born in another country.'<sup>43</sup>

In the early twentieth century, during a conversation at the Chintadripet Literary Society in Madras, Nivedita was asked: 'What will be your future work in India?' Her answer had it all: 'My life is given to India. In it I shall live and die' (5.246). She lived less than a decade since this utterance before breathing her last on 13 October 1911—her last words still ring with the spirit and optimism which had always been her hallmark: 'The frail boat is sinking, but I shall yet see the sunrise.'



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# Finding Nivedita from a Scottish Point of View

Murdo Macdonald



*The Blue Plaque of Sister Nivedita in Dungannon, Location: 16 Scotch Street,  
Northern Irish Council: Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council*

ON FRIDAY 27 MAY 2011 in Dungannon in County Tyrone an event was held to mark the centenary of the death of Margaret Noble (1867–1911), better known to us as Sister Nivedita. A public ceremony to rededicate a plaque in her honour was complemented by a conference on her life and work held in the Council Chamber. Thanks to the invitation of another remarkable woman from Dungannon, namely Jean McGuinness, I was fortunate enough to be one of the speakers. McGuinness has campaigned tirelessly for the recognition of Margaret Noble in the country of her birth and her play about Sister Nivedita, *Awakening a Nation*, was the culmination of those centenary celebrations.<sup>1</sup> She

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had asked me if I would speak about Nivedita's deep concern for the visual arts in the context not only of India but in relation to Celtic Revival of the time. I was only too pleased to do so because much of my own work is concerned with cultural revival, and such issues were at the very heart of Nivedita's work; indeed her cultural understanding and spiritual dedication were indissoluble.

My own awareness of Nivedita came through the work of her friend Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), a thinker to whose example I owe a great deal. He was a pioneer of human ecology and he saw cultural revival as a fundamental part of any modern society, whether considered from a local, national, or international point of view. A biologist by training, he was profoundly interested in the notion of evolution as it applied to civilisations. For Geddes, crucial to any successful future was an appreciation of the past; it was only



Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932)

through such appreciation that those acting in the present could act truly on behalf of future generations. That appreciation depended on an understanding of how people live and where they live, and how they explore the possibilities of that place as part of the wider globe. The beginning of such appreciation was in what Geddes called 'regional survey'. Such thinking was immediately attractive to Nivedita. In her book *The Web of Indian Life* she echoes Geddes when she writes: 'The foundation-stone of our knowledge of a people must be an understanding of their region. For social structure depends primarily on labour, and labour is necessarily determined by place. Thus we reach the secret of thought and ideals.'<sup>2</sup> In her epigraph to the same book she writes of Professor Patrick Geddes teaching her to understand a little of Europe and by doing so providing 'a method by which to read my Indian experiences' (iii).

Those words were published in 1904, and they show Nivedita's deep personal appreciation of Geddes. How had he made such an impression on her? The answer lies in Paris in 1900. Initial contact between Geddes and Nivedita had been made earlier that year in New York where Nivedita

had been teaching with Swami Vivekananda. In a memoir of Nivedita printed in *The Sociological Review* in 1913, Geddes recalled their first meeting and how it 'continued into intimacy and collaboration during the following summer, at that meeting of the International Association which became the Summer School of the Paris Exhibition.'<sup>3</sup>

Geddes had a high regard for the social value of major international exhibitions. Such events could be the starting point for creative thought about precisely the issues of locality and internationalism that were fundamental to his ideas of regional survey. He regarded universal exhibitions as the 'primordial liquid' that gave birth to museums,<sup>4</sup> and for Geddes a 'museum' was just that, a place where the muses were active. As early as 1887 he had published an extended critique of industrial exhibitions in which he exhorted the organisers of such events to 'take real and detailed heed of the claims of Art, Science, and Political Economy.'<sup>5</sup> The Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1900 met Geddes' prescription to a significant degree.<sup>6</sup> Seven years earlier at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Swamiji had presented Hinduism to the world at large as a major religion, emphasising its antiquity.<sup>7</sup> And just as Swamiji had articulated the case for Hindu revival, Geddes had articulated the case for Celtic revival during the same period. In Paris Swamiji lectured on Indian art, underlining the independent value of the early Buddhist art of India: such thinking was to be fundamental to Nivedita's contribution.<sup>8</sup>

In his autobiography, *My Window on the Street of the World*, Geddes' friend and colleague the economist James Mavor took the trouble to note the presence in Geddes' circle in Paris of both Vivekananda and Nivedita. Also in Paris was the biologist and physicist Jagadis Chandra Bose (1858–1937). Like Geddes, Bose was both a pioneering scientist and an impressive interdisciplinary thinker. Sister Nivedita numbered

Bose's wife among her closest friends and twenty years later Geddes would be Bose's biographer. That biography is a remarkable book.<sup>9</sup> Geddes emphasises not just Bose's eminence as a scientist but the spiritual importance of Bose's geographical and cultural quest to understand India. Geddes also gives us further insight into Nivedita by noting the importance of her friendship to Bose, not just in India, but in London where in times of difficulty Bose and his wife stayed with Nivedita's family (221–2). There was thus extended international social connection between Nivedita and Bose as well as intellectual friendship based on shared cultural interest.

A key theme in Geddes' biography of Bose is the notion of cultural pilgrimage as a method of understanding. He notes the importance of such activity to the Bose family not least in relation to the copying the Buddhist art of Ajanta, a project of which Nivedita was a key proponent (113). But Geddes also uses such Indian cultural pilgrimage to illuminate the importance of cognate activity for the Europe of 1920, so recently disrupted by war. Geddes writes:

The reunion of Europe, then, can most strongly, even if slowly, be made through the education of travel. Not merely in the recent tourist spirit, at least in the cruder forms; but in that combining of the best of modern cultural travel with something of the old spirit of pilgrimage which that helps effectively to renew.

And he continues by reflecting on the ever increasing appreciation of ... regional and civic interests, the natural, the spiritual, and the temporal together, and in aspects historic, actual and incipient. Does this seem 'Utopian'? It is after all but what the tourist and the wandering nature-lover, the art-student, and the historian have long been doing, and what the regional agriculturalist and the town planner are now in their turn doing. Today it lies with re-education, with reconstruction, and with

re-religion as well, to organise all these contacts more fully (118).

Those passages give insight into Nivedita's comment made sixteen years earlier, that Geddes, by teaching her 'to understand a little of Europe' had provided her with a method to read her Indian experiences.<sup>10</sup>

The key tool for that reading was what Geddes called 'the valley section'. Directly concerned with interpreting the geography and ecology of place, the valley section is essentially the course of a river from hill to sea, with all the different possibilities of land-use and settlement along its course. But it was equally a place of myth and pilgrimage for if one considers the valley section even in its most minimal form the aspects of land to which Geddes draws our attention are as significant spiritually and mythologically as they are economically and ecologically. The hilltop, the forest, the mine, the field, the city, the sea; and of course the implied river at the heart of the valley. Geddes' biographer Philip Boardman notes that the Ganges reminded Geddes of the river that helped to define his childhood in Scotland, the Tay.<sup>11</sup> Geddes wrote of that river that it will 'always be for me my main impulse of the life-stream and of the cosmos' (ibid.). Boardman continues by noting that this leads in turn to Geddes' earliest experience of sunsets reflected in the river and his 'first—and still brightest—vision of—what I took to be—God' (ibid.). And that cosmically inspiring life-stream was at the same time for Geddes the heart of the real valley that inspired his ecology: 'it must have been in the climbings and the ramblings over this fine valley landscape ... that I got the feeling of the valley section which has been a main vision of geography in later years' (ibid.).

The usefulness of the valley section as a method of reading a landscape is clear from the ease with which Geddes feels able to compare the Tay and the Ganges. Although the Tay is a



significant river flowing from the Scottish Highlands to the North Sea, in world geographical terms it is tiny compared to the Ganges flowing from its source in the Himalayas to its delta in Bengal. And yet Geddes' valley section, as an analysis of any river from source to sea, works as a method to understand both.

One would expect the salient elements of the physical geography of the planet to correspond with equally salient elements of the ecology of the human mind and in Geddes we have a consciousness of both the physical and the psychological aspects of landscape. And within that psychological aspect for Geddes is a consciousness of both the everyday and the legendary, and more, of the importance of the legendary for the everyday and vice versa. On the one hand Geddes respected the cultural integrity of myth systems, on the other hand he recognised their links and similarities across cultures. Not only that but their usefulness as ways of thinking, ways of coding ideas, sometimes matching one another, sometimes complementing one another. At the watershed of the valley we may find, perhaps, Parnassus or the Hill of Tara or Schiehallion or Mount Meru or Kailas or Fuji. Like Nivedita Geddes recognised mythological ideas as a language for use. He had an immediate understanding of what his younger contemporary C G Jung (1875–1961) called the archetypal. It is interesting to note that all three of these spiritually thoughtful Europeans shared a Calvinist background, Jung in Switzerland, Geddes in the Free Church of Scotland, and Nivedita in her Congregationalist church in Ireland. Churches which adhered to that particular form of Christianity in the nineteenth century seemed to facilitate theological, ecumenical and comparative religious debate. Both William Robertson Smith (1846–1894), whose work influenced Freud, and Smith's friend, James Frazer (1854–1941) of *Golden Bough* fame, had Scottish Calvinist backgrounds,

as did one of the greatest of all creative mythologists, the novelist and poet George MacDonald (1824–1905). Precisely why Calvinism was so generative of explorers of comparative religion is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that within the non-hierarchical structure of Calvinist churches is the implication that all views are worthy of consideration. That attitude that different types or aspects of thinking have equal value also helps one to understand the equality of value that thinkers like Nivedita and Geddes ascribed to both arts and sciences.

Over and above the intellectual context of their Calvinist backgrounds, Nivedita and Geddes shared a keen awareness of the indigenous cultures of their own countries and the oppression—usually in the name of 'progress'—that such Gaelic culture had suffered. That had been evident as governmental policy since about 1600, but had been most vigorously pursued in the years since the Jacobite uprising of 1745–6. Geddes' father was a native Scottish Gaelic speaker and Nivedita was herself an Irish Gaelic speaker. Such intimate contact with the Gàidhealtachd on the part of both these thinkers would have been a real point of contact between them. At the same time the awareness of systematic attempts to destroy local and national cultures gave both Nivedita and Geddes an intimate understanding of the issues that advocates of Indian cultural revival had to face.

After Swamiji's death in 1902, Nivedita became the champion of his view on the importance of Indian art, strongly supporting the efforts of E B Havell in particular. In 1908 a paper by Havell which helped to bring the Bengal school to international prominence was published in a key British journal *The Studio*.<sup>12</sup> The same year saw the publication of Havell's book, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*. Tapati Guha-Thakurta has commented that the assessment of this book

by Nivedita in 1909 was 'certainly as important for Indian readers as the book itself.'<sup>13</sup>

Nivedita would only live two more years but something of her significance in that period is indicated by Ananda Coomaraswamy:

I should like to see deputations of Ceylonese young men sent to Europe, to Denmark, France, Hungary, Finland, Ireland, and also to America and Japan to study what is being done by leaders of education here, see what experiments are being made, and learn what education really means. I should like them also to study very seriously Indian history and culture for two years. Above all I should like them to come under the personal influence of men like Professor Geddes and women like Sister Nivedita. They would then be qualified by knowledge and responsibility, as they should be even now by inheritance, to shape and create.<sup>14</sup>

This comment is the more poignant because it would not be published until after Nivedita's death. One can also note that Coomaraswamy takes Patrick Geddes for granted as a defender of Indian cultural values, even though his essay was written three years before Geddes went to India. After Nivedita's death in 1911, Coomaraswamy was to perform a key role in taking her work forward, by stepping in to finish her book *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*. That book has a double importance for it reiterated to the West in a highly readable form some of the key passages of Indian legend, and at the same time, through its careful illustration under the direction of Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), acted as an introduction to the new Bengal school of painting. In his introduction Coomaraswamy comments on the practical international importance of understanding myth: 'The stories related here ... include very much of which a knowledge is absolutely essential for every foreigner who proposes in any way to co-operate with the Indian people for the attainment of their desired

ends—nowhere more clearly formulated than in mythology and art.'<sup>15</sup>

Coomaraswamy also indicates the high regard for Nivedita in the West:

Sister Nivedita, to whom the present work was first entrusted, needs no introduction to Western or to Indian readers. A most sincere disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who was himself a follower of the great Ramakrishna, she brought to the study of Indian life and literature a sound knowledge of Western educational and social science, and an unsurpassed enthusiasm of devotion to the peoples and the ideals of her adopted country. Her chief works are *The Web of Indian Life*, almost the only fair account of Hindu society written in English, and *Kali the Mother*, where also for the first time the profound tenderness and terror of the Indian Mother-cult are presented to Western readers in such a manner as to reveal its true religious and social significance. Through these books Nivedita became not merely an interpreter of India to Europe, but even more, the inspiration of a new race of Indian students, no longer anxious to be Anglicised, but convinced that all real progress, as distinct from mere political controversy, must

Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934)



be based on national ideals, upon intentions already clearly expressed in religion and art (v).

He concludes by noting: 'The Indian myths here retold include almost all those which are commonly illustrated in Indian sculpture and painting. Finally, they include much that must very soon be recognized as belonging not only to India, but to the whole world; I feel that this is above all true of the Ramayana, which is surely the best tale of chivalry and truth and the love of creatures that was ever written' (vii).


That simply underlines Nivedita's importance as a teacher of Indian culture to the West. It also reminds us that through Coomaraswamy we find a direct link from Nivedita to later thinkers such as Joseph Campbell.

In his essay 'Young India' collected in his book *The Dance of Shiva* published in 1918 Coomaraswamy writes: 'Sometimes the genuine English educationalist, seeking to restore the Indian classics or vernaculars to their real place in Indian curricula, is met by the determined opposition of the Nationalists: and it is not without reason that Professor Patrick Geddes ... has remarked that it would be a mistake to allow the Europeanised Indian graduates to have their way with Indian education: "that would be continuing our mistake," as he says, "not correcting it."' <sup>16</sup> That addresses precisely the issue that Nivedita had addressed. Not nationalism in any simple way or nay sense, but rather tensions within nationalism. Coomaraswamy is addressing what Frantz Fanon called 'inferiorism' that is to say the adoption by the intellectual class of a colonised nation—whether that class is politically nationalist or otherwise—of the values of the coloniser at the expense of their own. As a Scot of Highland background operating within a British Imperial culture—whether in Scotland or in India—Geddes was fully aware of this issue. In Scotland it

has attracted discussion in more recent times in the works of George Davie and others. <sup>17</sup> For example James Kelman poses a question fundamental to challenging such inferiority: 'When does "teaching" become colonisation?' <sup>18</sup> One can shed further light on this through the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's idea of the 'cultural bomb' an intellectual weapon deployed routinely in the interests of economic greed masquerading as 'empire'.

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces that would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote ridiculous dreams. <sup>19</sup>

Ngugi is writing in a Kenyan context but what he says is resonant with Nivedita's understanding of the need for cultural revival whether Indian or Celtic. Indeed one might regard her as one of the most resolute of all those who confronted the culturally destructive attitudes to which Ngugi refers.

I began this paper by drawing attention to the contribution that Patrick Geddes made to Nivedita's thinking. By now it will be clear that her influence on him was equally profound. Attending that celebration of her life in Dungannon in 2011 made me aware of how vital—in the fullest sense of that word—her work in the early years of the twentieth century had been. It remains vital today. 



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Councillor Trevor Wilson, Chair of Mid Ulster District Council, Dungannon, Ireland,  
Unveils a Sculpture of Sister Nivedita at Ranfurly House Arts and Visitor Centre, Dungannon  
Standing Left: Swami Sarvalokananda, Ramakrishna Mission  
Standing Right: Swami Purnananda, Spiritual Director of Eire Vedanta Society





*Sister Nivedita's Portrait at  
the Ramakrishna Mission Nivedita Girls' School, Kolkata*

**S**ISTER NIVEDITA, born Margaret Elizabeth Noble in 1867 in Ireland, a British Colony at that time, was spiritually reborn in India in March 1898 as a brahmacharini of the Ramakrishna Order, being initiated to that effect by her guru Swami Vivekananda. Swamiji gave his initiated disciple the name Nivedita which meant in English one who is dedicated to India. Ever since her initiation, Nivedita, the dedicated, embraced her adopted country as her very own, selflessly giving her all to her beloved country and waging a relentless fight for India and the causes dear to India. Of the numerous instances of Nivedita's 'Indian' struggles in the fields of activity such as

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## ***Fighter Extraordinary: Sister Nivedita and Her Indian Struggles***

**Dr Anil Baran Ray and  
Dr Sukanya Ray**

religion, education, politics, and art,<sup>1</sup> we present for analysis in this article two—one in the field of religion and the other from the field of education—to show the extraordinary fighter that she was. The first one analysed here shows what she did in India, in Calcutta itself, to give and to be an example of her Master's concept of dynamic religion. And the second one, as presented here, shows what she did in the US for the cause of Indian women's education to live up to her Master's dream of raising India through appropriate measures pertaining to women's education in India.

**I**

In talking about Nivedita's religion, the first question that we are called upon to answer is: why did Margaret E Noble take to Hinduism? She was born into a protestant Christian family. Both her grandfather John Noble and father Samuel Noble were congressional ministers, grandfather in Ireland and father in England. Neither was orthodox in preaching Christianity. Both believed that service to the poor and needy was a salient mark of Christianity and that Ireland had to overcome her traditional Catholic-Protestant rivalry and put up a united fight against the British in order to attain her independence.

Margaret was only ten when her father died at the age of thirty-four. But even at that tender age, she believed like her father, that unselfish service to people, undeterred by narrow considerations of Church, Sect or Parish, and that a spirit of free inquiry rather than unquestioning obedience to a set of dogmas and doctrines represented Christianity better than what the orthodox Church fathers or such-like people preached. Unfortunately for Margaret, Miss Larette, the headmistress of the Halifax School, where Margaret was sent to study, after her father's death,<sup>2</sup> viewed Christianity in orthodox terms of sin and penance, filling her students with fear of sinfulness and obligation arising therefrom to atone for the same. Margaret felt miserable in the face of such interpretation of Christianity at Halifax.

Margaret's experience was no better at Wrexham where she joined as a teacher at a secondary school at the age of nineteen. A mining town, Wrexham was dotted with slums in which the poor mining workers lived in squalor. The appalling living conditions of workers pained Margaret and she resolved to work for the amelioration of their conditions, after her hours at the school. As working in a team would enable her to serve better, she enrolled herself as a volunteer-worker of St Mark's church at Wrexham. Her ideal was service to all who needed assistance without any discrimination as to whether one was a member of St Mark's church or not. The church's policy was sectarian and selective, based on the affiliation to the church. The clash was inevitable and it came in a while. Margaret resigned from the work of the church and took the issue of the ideal of social service—whether it should be humanitarianism or sectarianism—to the pages of newspapers and journals. Altogether her experiences at Halifax and Wrexham disposed her freedom-loving and ideal-orientated soul, a legacy from her family, to look for such a religion or such an

alternative to Christianity as would be more satisfying to her in her search for truth in religion, which she eventually found out in Hinduism.

Despite her highest regards for Jesus Christ for his supreme sacrifices for humanity, Margaret Noble was uncomfortable as to the truth of certain Christian doctrines pertaining to the origin of the world and the innate sinfulness of human beings. Her search for truth began with the natural science and it seemed to her that the answer that the natural science offered as to how this world originated was more logical than the doctrines of the Christian religion. Next, she took to the studies of Buddhism and felt that the salvation through nirvana that Buddha preached 'was decidedly more consistent with the truth than the preachings of the Christian religion.'<sup>3</sup> The more she studied and compared, the more her faith in Christianity tottered. The decisive break came when she first met Swami Vivekananda in London in November 1895 and listened to his lectures and talks in 1896. His teachings satisfied her queries for truth in religion and as such marked the turning point for her faith.

In detesting fearfulness of sin, sectarian practices, unquestioning loyalty, and regimentation in religion, what Margaret had sought after was the freedom to realise her own true self in and through religion. In his exposition of Vedantic Hinduism, Swamiji taught that the goal of religion in the highest sense of the term was mukti—that is, the freedom of the realised soul. Every human soul, according to Swamiji, had the capacity inherent to attain the goal of mukti, because every human soul was potentially divine with infinite power to realise the divinity within. Swamiji emphasised that as human beings are divine and God in essence, sinfulness exists only in the ignorance of humans about their real nature and that in his struggle to realise himself, humans only proceed from truth



to Truth—from lower truth to higher truth and finally to the highest truth of her or his oneness with God Himself. What is involved in such journey of a human being is the persistent uplifting of the spirit till mukti is obtained through the merging of the human soul into Ananda. Ruling out any regimentation in man's journey from being through becoming to Being, Swamiji held that each could pick and choose among work, worship, knowledge, and psychic control, according to one's temperament and disposition, to travel towards the goal of self-realisation. Thus, Swamiji upheld 'the perfect freedom of every soul to be itself' (1.7) and in its own way at that—a proposition and an assertion that was completely in accordance with the long-held longing of Margaret E Noble.

Swamiji's stand on service to humanity as a means of self-realisation—that such service must be rendered in the spirit of service to God in human beings—was no less appealing to Margaret Noble. The stand ruled out any sectarian consideration and discrimination in the determination of beneficiaries of service and Margaret felt happy at the vindication *this* provided to her protest against the discriminatory practices of churches like that of Wrexham.

Interestingly, Swamiji gave to his London audiences a very rounded definition of renunciation. Renunciation, traditionally held to be a religious concept, was *now* given a secular extension by Swamiji. For him, the concept meant self-abnegation, that is the negation by human beings of the meaner elements in them and their cultivation of the best and noblest, the finest and strongest in their innate and essentially divine nature. To illustrate the point, he gave the example of a mother—a mother who on seeing her child walking into the way of a tiger would think nothing of her own self and jump even into the mouth of the advancing tiger to save

the child from the certain death. In holding that the true freedom of a human being lay in developing his nature to the level of divinity, Swamiji established an inalienable link between freedom and renunciation. Freedom of divinity, of self-realisation, was the goal and renunciation the means to that goal. As he observed in one of his lectures to his London audience that included Margaret Noble:

That ideal of freedom that you [the Western people] perceived was correct but you projected it outside yourself, and that was your mistake. Bring it nearer and nearer, until you find that it was all the time within you, it was the Self of your own self. That freedom was your own nature ... not only to see it intellectually, but to perceive it, actualize it, much more definitely than we perceive this world. Then we shall know that we are free.<sup>4</sup>

In brief, three features of Swamiji's discourses in London struck Margaret Noble deeply: (a) the breadth of his religious culture; (b) the great intellectual newness and interest of the thought that he had brought to us; and (c) the fact that he took his stand on what was noblest and best in us and sounded his call in the name of that which was strongest and finest, and was not in any way dependent on the meaner elements in human beings.<sup>5</sup> Elaborating on just why Swamiji's teachings attracted not only her but also a lot of other people in England, Margaret Noble observed:

To not a few of us the words of Swami Vivekananda came as living water to men perishing of thirst. Many of us had been conscious for years past of that growing uncertainty and despair, with regard to religion, which has beset the intellectual life of Europe for half a century. Belief in the dogmas of Christianity has become impossible to us, and we had no tool, such as we now hold, by which to cut away the doctrinal shell from the kernel of reality in our

Faith. To these the Vedanta has given intellectual confirmation and philosophical expression of their own mistrusted intuitions. 'The peoples that walked in darkness have seen a great light' (2.389-90).

The above observation makes it clear that Swamiji's London discourses marked a turning point for Margaret Noble. After years of walking in darkness, she found a faith she could lean upon, intellectually as well as spiritually. No wonder that before Swami Vivekananda left England for India in December 1896, Margaret Noble called him her Master and expressed her desire to fulfil herself in selfless service to the religion and the country of her adoption. Swami Vivekananda responded by saying, 'Yes, in India ... that is where you belong.'<sup>6</sup>

Margaret Noble arrived in India in January 1898. An occasion arose within a year—March 1898—of her initiation into Hinduism to prove that she, *now* the Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda, was truly up to all the challenges of her dedication to India. The challenge was in the form of fighting the plague that broke out in Baghbazar of Calcutta in early 1899. She was put into the charge of handling this challenge by her guru Swami Vivekananda.

A prophet of inner life as an apostle of Hinduism and a loving worker for India rolled into one, Swami Vivekananda formulated the concept of dynamic religion, training up in the process a number of young sannyasins—'Sappers and Miners of religion',<sup>7</sup> as he called them—to work selflessly for the needy and afflicted in catastrophes such as famines, floods, and epidemics. Swamiji always considered renunciation as the key to religion, but for him, renunciation never meant giving up the world or withdrawing into a cave or cell and contemplating God alone to the exclusion of everything else. Giving a new meaning to 'renunciation', he said that, for

sannyasins it meant living in the world without being of it, that is, working for the good of others in the world without being carried away by the desires of the world, remaining fixed always on the central goal of self-realisation. 'Stand in the whirl and madness of action and reach the Centre' (6.84), as he said.

Nivedita took her Master's teachings and the interlinked concepts of religion, renunciation and service to heart and when the dreaded disease of bubonic plague broke out in a virulent form in Baghbazar of Calcutta in February 1899 and kept raging, she, at her Master's words, assumed the charge of fighting the disease by nursing the afflicted and sanitising the affected area. Her approach represented an exemplification of her Master's concept of dynamic religion—religion as active renunciation and selfless service for the good of others. 'That is the goal to which I am leading you',<sup>8</sup> said Swamiji to Nivedita. Elaborating on this, he said to Nivedita, 'You must unite within yourself the practical spirit and culture of the perfect citizen, with love of poverty, purity, and complete abandonment of self. Those are the condition under which your faith will blossom' (ibid.). Having counselled Nivedita to such effect, Swamiji went on to say that Baghbazar must be saved from the ravages of bubonic plague and it was 'for you to do this' (154). He assigned Swami Sadananda the task of assisting Nivedita in the plague work.

So severe was the plague and so rapidly it was spreading across Baghbazar claiming the lives of around one hundred people every day that it seemed to Nivedita that she had an implacable war on hand to fight against. Undaunted, she took steps like visiting the stricken homes making inquiries, preparing lists of vacant beds, turning unused sheds into temporary dispensaries, organising volunteers to help her and Swami Sadananda, and going to the length of cleaning

the dingy lanes of Baghbazar herself when there were not enough volunteers to undertake the cleaning work. Besides these, she would undertake the nursing of patients with all her heart. So deep and affectionate was her involvement in plague work that Dr R G Kar, the government doctor in charge of the treatment of the plague in Baghbazar was astounded. To quote Dr Kar: 'During this calamity, the compassionate figure of Sister Nivedita was seen in every slum of the Baghbazar. She helped others with money without giving a thought to her own condition. At one time when her own diet consisted only of milk and fruits, she gave up milk to meet the medical expenses of a patient.'<sup>9</sup> A witness to Nivedita's tireless nursing of plague patients and with a mother's heart at that, Dr Kar reported that he saw Nivedita nursing a child patient in a slum in Baghbazar when he came one morning to see that patient. When he came to visit the patient again in the afternoon, he saw that Nivedita was still sitting with the child in her lap in the damp and weather-beaten hut in that locality. And for Nivedita, nursing meant not only giving food, medicine and bath to patients, but also disinfecting the unhealthy huts

and whitewashing their walls. Amazed, Dr Kar wrote: 'Her nursing never slackened even when death was a certainty' (76).

Swamiji was greatly moved at the devotion with which Nivedita took up the plague work. Apprehending that she might fall ill herself in fighting the scourge, he got the Ramakrishna Mission to appoint a plague committee comprising Swamis Sadananda, Shivananda, Nityananda, and Atmananda to advise Nivedita in the plague service. This committee held that the root causes of the plague in Baghbazar lay in insanitation and ignorance of the people and that they had to be handled. Wholesale cleansing of the affected locality was the answer to insanitation. Nivedita and Sadananda, affectionately called the 'scavenger swami', for his role in cleansing operation, led the charge. To meet the mounting costs of disinfectants and so on, Nivedita advanced an appeal to the general public and to the affluent 'European Calcutta' for funds. At the same time steps were taken to dispel the people's ignorance about plague by teaching them the basic rules towards the prevention and tackling of the disease.

With steps such as noted above, the plague





came to a halt in Baghbazar and a government committee expressed its appreciation of the magnificent work done by Nivedita and her associates. In response to a query as to why they did not inform the government earlier of their good work on plague, Nivedita replied that '*that* was not our business anyway. We wanted to help the people, not make a fuss.'<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Nivedita's plague work was Swamiji's dynamic religion, service to God in humanity and practical Vedanta in the sense of application of the best and noblest of divinity in human beings to human beings. If such selfless service to people evoked the appreciation of the government-appointed committee and of the larger society, it proved that Nivedita fought effectively the war against plague that seemed to be implacable in the first instance. The secret behind her success was that she was involved in it completely—body, mind, and soul. Her two months fight against the plague in the hot climate of Calcutta jeopardised her health and endangered her life, but she was unrelenting in her fight. It was as if death for the cause was her motto. Didn't her Master say, 'Sympathy for the poor, the downtrodden, even unto death—this is the motto'?<sup>11</sup> It was such motto that sustained Nivedita in her death-defying extraordinary fight against the plague in Baghbazar of Calcutta as also in her other equally challenging Indian struggles such as the one we discuss in the next section of this article.

## II

Close on the heels of her meeting the challenge of dynamic religion in India, Nivedita was involved in an engaging struggle in the United States for raising funds for the education of India's women. The story of this struggle as related below, brought upon her so much pain and suffering over a period of eight months from November 1899 to June 1900 in the US that it was

almost deathly for her, though, eventually, with her guru Swamiji's help and grace she was able to tide over the crisis and bring success to her efforts and cause.

A few words on the background to Nivedita's journey to the US are in order. Swamiji prioritised the education of Indian women, holding *that* to be an essential condition for raising India as a nation: 'If the women are raised, then their children will by their noble actions glorify the name of the country—then will culture, knowledge, power, and devotion awaken in the land.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the thought of Indian women's education weighed so heavily on his mind that in course of a conversation in London in 1896, he said to Margaret Noble 'I have plans for the women of my own country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me.'<sup>13</sup> Swamiji was more definitive in July 1897, when in response to Margaret's urgings to allow her to come to India, he wrote from India, 'Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a man, but a woman—a real lioness—to work for the Indians, women specially. ... Your education, sincerity, purity, immense love, determination, and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted.'<sup>14</sup>

Within a few months of her arrival in India and *initiation*, Nivedita set to work for women's education, after her guru's ideal, opening a school for the purpose in Baghbazar of Calcutta in November 1898. The Holy Mother Sarada Devi inaugurated the school on 13 November 1898 and blessed *it* along with Swamiji as a symbol of women's education-cum-awakening in India. The school was run for six months with funds given to Swamiji for the purpose by the Maharaj of Kashmir plus funds contributed by Nivedita herself. No help from the British government of India was ever sought and the Belur Math,

with funds spent for months on plague service in Baghbazār and being in financial straits on that count, was not in a position to help out. Swamiji was ailing at this time and was being urged by his loyal American followers like Mrs Ole Bull and Josephine MacLeod to come to the US for recuperation. At this hour of her crisis, Nivedita betook herself to her Guru who suggested that she might accompany him and Swami Turiyananda in the voyage to the West and appealed to the American women for help with funds to the cause of their sisters' education in India. The voyage began in June 1899 and they eventually reached America in September 1899. Having lived for some two months in the country house of Swamiji's friends in New York—Mr and Mrs Leggett, and utilising the time for completing her book, *Kali the Mother*, Nivedita plunged into her fund-raising mission in the United States in November 1899.

Before taking the plunge, Nivedita made some crucial decisions as to her approach to the mission pertaining to the kind of dress she would put on in appearing before the American women, and the subjects she would talk about in addressing them. Her resolution was that in keeping with the kind of life she embraced in India, she would put on a nun's robe in America and address the Americans on issues such as the ideals of religious life in India, the ideals of Hindu women's life, the training in purity and austerity she had undergone willingly in India as a Hindu brahmacharini, and so on. Her resolution also was that she would highlight in America only the strong and positive points of India and of Hinduism, an approach that stood in sharp contrast to that of Ramabai, a Maharashtrian lady from India, who had converted to Christianity, spoke before the American women on the miserable conditions of Indian women and raised funds from them by evoking their

pity for the Indian women. Ramabai's practice of presenting India in a negative light to foreigners by focusing on the aberrant practices of Hinduism and earning the patronage of foreigners thereby was inconceivable to Swamiji and Sister Nivedita. Swamiji would not do any such thing even for an empire, and Nivedita with her 'I love Hinduism [and India] with my whole heart and soul'<sup>15</sup> approach would be the last person to do any such thing. Thus, Nivedita's speeches and actions in America were meant to be an antidote to Ramabai in terms of all that the latter had denounced about India, Hinduism, and Swamiji.

As Nivedita launched her mission and began her lecture tour in America, hoping to enthuse the American women about contributing towards the education of women in India, the realisation came to her gradually that things were not what she expected them to be. She was in for a rude shock in several towns and cities, even in pain and agony in some, where the Ramabai circles had spread their influence. Indeed, her mission to America turned out to be an ordeal for her marked with struggles and suffering that in the best spirit of a true fighter she bore for the cause she held dear to her heart.

Nivedita's first stop was Chicago. Within a day or two after her arrival at Chicago on 8 November 1899, Miss Mary Hale of the Hale family of Chicago, Swamiji's good friends in Chicago, came to see her, trying to convince her that she would fare better in Chicago if she gave up her nun's robe and took instead to an English woman's clothes. Nivedita politely declined in accordance with her earlier resolution on this. Mary Hale warned her that Christian America might not take kindly to her enterprise of collecting funds for a 'Hindu' cause, that Vivekananda had his friends as well as bitter opponents in America, and that the latter might make things difficult for her in America.

Undeterred by such warnings and forebodings, Nivedita gave three lectures at Chicago between November 15 and November 20. The first, on 15 November, to a Woman's Guild, the second, 16 November, to the children of an elementary school, and the third, on 20 November, to the Hull House of Chicago to an audience made up of immigrants of different races and religions. The subject of the third lecture was 'Religious Life in India'. With examples drawn from the Pilgrim's Camp at Pahalgam and the mystical experience of Sri Ramakrishna, she explained 'peace which the pilgrim of life finds when he moves forward toward his own liberation, with the mysterious assurance that everything is in himself: the effort, the mastery, the joy over the gift of oneself, and the great final light.'<sup>16</sup> The first two gave Nivedita the opportunity to familiarise the American women and children with the history, geography, and the Puranas of India, but brought her no funds. The third brought her an earning of fifteen dollars towards the educational enterprise and service for women in India.

In sharp contrast with her happy moments at these three, what Nivedita experienced at a Missionary Society at Chicago was very disappointing and agonising for her. She spoke before the Missionary Society on 'The conditions of Indian Women'. A pet theme of many Christian missionaries in India-bashing was their malignment of Indian women with observations that Indian women held no place of honour in Indian society, and that they were mostly illiterate and ignorant. In contrast to these charges, Nivedita presented the Indian women 'in a loving way'<sup>17</sup> in her lecture to the Missionary Society, throwing up the strong points of their position in Indian society. She held that family constituted the nucleus of the Indian social system and that, with the faithful and quiet life

an Indian women lives within her family and the sacrifice she makes for her husband, in-laws, and children, it is she more than anybody else, who preserves the family and therefore the society in the last instance. Thus, far from being dishonoured or oppressed, an Indian woman, as mother, is held in the highest regard by Indian men. As a matter of fact, an Indian man takes pride in referring to his spouse as 'the mother of my children' that underlines the pivotal position of mother in Indian families.

Nivedita admitted that being innocent of the ability to read and write, many Indian women were ignorant or uneducated, but on that count alone they could not be called ignorant or uneducated, because they received training in the virtues of dignity, gentleness, cleanliness, and thrift in their homes, and their knowledge of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—the two best specimens of the literature of the world—also in their homes.

*Mary Hale*





For all her loving presentation of the conditions of Indian women, Nivedita earned only the wrath of the Missionary Society because they were predisposed to think otherwise, which led Nivedita to observe that the 'subtle mental atmosphere [of the Missionary Society] was too awful for words' (1.242), that *it* made her 'tingle with despair' (ibid.), and that she felt so terrible here that it seemed 'like contriving to breathe under the weight of the Pyramids' (1.243). Indeed, her detestation was so intense that she went on to say that compared to those missionaries, the elementary school children she addressed the other day were 'So well-educated' (1.244).

Her experience of the Missionary society of Chicago made it clear to Nivedita that she was not welcome in certain quarters of Chicago and that, except for the wrath, she could not earn any money from them for her Indian cause. She did not charge any fee or subscription for her lectures, and the voluntary contribution to the cause, except for fifteen dollars from the Hull House, was nil so far in Chicago. Chicago was disappointing to her in another way. She did not get too many invitations to address people or women there. At least, the opportunities were few and far between. Under the circumstances, undoubtedly with some strain of disappointment, the fighter in Nivedita opened her heart to Mrs Ole Bull in the following words: 'I can't tell you where I am in the battle now. I am not out of heart, but the fight is slow' (1.247).

In order to boost up her fund raising and bring some regularity in the method of collection, Nivedita resolved to ask those people in Chicago who were sympathetic with her cause of education for Indian women for individual contributions of a dollar each year, thereby hoping to raise three-thousand dollars a year. She also thought of asking for a fee or subscription for attending her lectures, following which the

Arts and Crafts Association of the Hull House paid fifteen dollars for the lecture Nivedita delivered to them on the ancient arts of India on 1 December 1899. The Association also offered to buy the brass utensils and select embroideries of India, and requested Nivedita to procure those things for them from India.

Following an invitation from a women's club of Chicago, Nivedita participated in a discussion on a paper on Colonization presented at the club on 6 December 1899. The paper made out the thesis that the US should assume a special responsibility for spreading the Anglo-Saxon civilisation in the world. In her comments on the paper, Nivedita made the counterpoint that the American ideals would be better served if America worked instead for the freedom of the colonised nations and the emancipation of humanity. Being applauded for her comments, Nivedita thought that she had struck the heart of Chicago in the Women's club in Chicago and fancied that 'if I get 100 people here to promise me 1 dollar a year each for 10 years it would be 1000 dollars' (1.259). She realised soon that possibilities and promises were not the same as actualities. All in all, Nivedita achieved little in Chicago in terms of actual financial contribution to her cause in India, and acknowledged regretfully with pain and agony that her efforts in Chicago amounted to 'foolish waste of strength' (1.260). In the midst of such pain and agony, her guru's letter telling her that 'your work in Chicago will not do much I fear' (1.258) indicated to Nivedita that it would no longer be advisable for her to prolong her stay in Chicago. Accordingly, she decided to shift from Chicago and pursue her mission elsewhere in America.

Nivedita received one final blow in Chicago before her departure from the city. She wanted to form in Chicago a committee to carry on her mission on Indian women's education in her

absence. She wanted Miss Mary Hale to be the secretary of this committee, but she refused saying that 'she and her family would rather not be identified with my [Nivedita's] work' (296). The Hales were among the earliest friends of Swamiji in America and Nivedita was devastated with their refusal to her proposal. Crying out in pain she said, 'If this is the attitude of Swami's people, how can I ever expect to do anything anywhere?' (ibid.). She summarised her agonising experience in Chicago in the following words: 'It is so like climbing in gravel!' (ibid.). Most people in Chicago, she said, made her tell them everything about India for hours, but they never gave her 'anything back, not even one dollar' (ibid.). The issue for her was not one of feeling helpless individually. She knew that she was fighting for a larger cause and yet no help was forthcoming, and that made her feeling of despair worse. Recalling her Master's words that the confession of weakness makes one weak, Nivedita put aside her sense of despair, and having regained her sense of inner strength, resolved to keep the fight on in the face of all obstacles and difficulties with this optimism that all will be good in the end for the education of her 'poor babies' in India. As she said, 'I know I must go on patiently until I meet the right people, whom I surely shall find here and there. If there are none, my poor babies cannot be educated, that is all!' (ibid.).

Nivedita failed in her fund-raising mission towards women's education for several reasons. First, as Swamiji observed in 1893 at the Parliament of Religions, it was always difficult to 'get help for heathens from Christians in a Christian land'.<sup>18</sup> Second, Nivedita's sensational initiation into Hinduism did not go down well with the American people. Third, she spoke of a philosophical and mystical India that was not appealing enough to the American people. Fourth, her appearance in a nun's robe was somewhat out of place.

Any number of reasons can be given for Nivedita's apparent failure in Chicago. The point however is not her failure or the moments of despondency, despair, and agony, which she experienced in her battle. The overriding point rather is that she had an indomitable inner strength and resources to draw upon which kept her going, taking the occasional failures in her stride. An inexhaustible source of strength and inspiration to Nivedita was her guru, Swamiji. In her moments of agony in Chicago, she drew enormous comfort from her Guru's words that it was indeed the lot of the world's best and bravest to carry the world's burden willingly and suffer in the process of fighting things (7521). Her American friends like Josephine MacLeod also inspired her to carry on her Indian mission and the struggle. When she was inconsolable over the Hale's refusal to cooperate with her in forming a guild to help her cause in Chicago, she found solace in the words of Miss MacLeod to this effect that the Hales adored Swamiji 'in their own way and not

*Josephine MacLeod, Photograph Taken in Kashmir 1898*



ours'<sup>19</sup> and that instead of feeling unhappy over what the Hales did, the right course of action for Nivedita would be to go her own way and speak her own message to the people in America.

Following her decision to shift from Chicago, Nivedita arrived at Jackson of Michigan on 10 January 1900 and spent two days each at Jackson and the neighbouring university town of Ann Arbor. Somehow Nivedita had the notion that all small towns were rather narrow in outlook. Her response to the warm welcome extended to her at Jackson, therefore, was less than whole-hearted. Obviously, still sore over her experience at Chicago, she curtly asked the assembled people if her presence was a great pleasure to them, were they going to give her anything by way of contributing to her mission of education for Indian women? She felt ashamed when in response to her sarcastic poser, a lady politely asked her 'And what can we do to help you?' When Nivedita said that she wanted them to give a dollar for ten years, a lady from the audience spontaneously said that 'I am so thankful. I never wanted to give anyone a dollar in my life so much as I do you, this afternoon.'<sup>20</sup> Nivedita's audience at Jackson acknowledge that no great things can be done in the world without money, and offered to form a group to help Nivedita's work for the Indian women with regular annual contribution to her cause. One lady even whispered to Nivedita, 'I am going to try to be as loving as ever I can' (ibid.) and that evening she sent a note to Nivedita begging her to accept five dollars as modest contribution to her cause.

Nivedita left such a good impression on Jackson that one Mr O' Donnell of the town, who until Nivedita's visit, was a bitter opponent of Swamiji, *now* said to Nivedita that as superintendent of all the Michigan Sunday schools he would take 'the delights of going to the Rector and suggesting Swami [Vivekananda] as a

preacher for some Sunday!!!' (ibid.) Elated at such conversion of a 'foe', Nivedita wrote with witty humour to her Guru: 'Now Swami—you have to acknowledge that you were mistaken—America for ever! In Jackson Mich. there lived a man to whom your name was as a red rag to the infuriate bull. Today he is your friend and mine—because ---- Your daughter has a sense of humour!!!!!!' (1300).

The quaint little university town of Ann Arbor was equally cordial to Nivedita. She read her essay on Sri Ramakrishna before the people assembled there to welcome her and told them in response to their query that Swami Vivekananda 'was in fact the real, though not official head of the Order to which I had been admitted, and that he had admitted me' (1298). She also announced to receptive people of Ann Arbor that Swamiji 'was not only one of the great historic teachers of the East, but in my view also of the West' (ibid.).

Like in Jackson, in Ann Arbor too, a lady entreated Nivedita to accept her contribution of five dollars to Nivedita's cause in India, modestly telling her that she made her contribution with all her heart, even though she knew that 'That won't go very far towards 15 or 20 thousand!' (ibid.).

It is not that Jackson and Ann Arbor gave Nivedita a lot of funds, but they were great in giving her love and warmth. Neither funds nor appreciation came to Nivedita at the city of Detroit that she visited next. She addressed the Women's Club at Detroit on 15 January 1900 only to be 'grilled and roasted' by her audience. One lady told her in a tone of contempt that what Nivedita had to say about India was nothing new, and that what they had already learnt from the Christian missionaries was in any case far more informative, and in a word better than Nivedita's representation of India. Another lady



tried to provoke Nivedita into attacking the missionaries. When the President of the club 'broke through hospitality to cross-question [Nivedita] about polygamy' (1.301) in India, Nivedita fought back with the observation that divorce prevailing in Western societies was no less an evil and that perhaps polygamy served India to obviate the evil of divorce of Western societies. With a look full of scorn for Nivedita, the lady in question observed that the Indians were like the Mormons of America to which Nivedita shot back that 'not like Mormons I think! Rather—not quite so bad as Christians!' (ibid.) One woman pointed out to Nivedita that the practice in India of husband and wife not eating together was an uncivilised one and asked her to teach the Indians 'a higher way' (ibid.) in this matter. Nivedita observed politely that the matter should be left to the choice of the concerned couples themselves, and reminded the American lady that certainly it would not be to the liking of the American people if the English people advised them about their manners and habits. In the face of Nivedita's efforts in this connection to highlight the strong points of women's position in Indian society, some members of the Women's club of Detroit kept pointing out with vehemence that the women held inferior positions in Indian society, that the preference in India was for the son over the daughter, that the child-widows led miserable lives in India, and that the Hindu mothers threw their baby daughters to crocodiles in the Ganges.

Obviously, the Women's club of Detroit believed in the anti-India propaganda of the Christian missionaries, and in the campaigns of the Ramabai circles in America about the conditions of women in India, and all this led an exasperated Nivedita to observe that 'I never was in a gathering so like a lunatic-asylum' (ibid.). Indeed, after Nivedita's lecture one lady came up

to Nivedita to rudely tell her that India needed missionaries much more than preachers like Swami Vivekananda. Another lady also came up to Nivedita and purposefully pronounced Swamiji's name with such a sneer that Nivedita had to face round on her and cut her to size by telling her sharply, 'He is my Master. I owe more to him than to [any] other living person' (1.302). Nivedita was never more angry with an audience and she gave expression to her anger in these words: 'I suppose it is a good thing that I did not break out and attack them, though they richly deserved it for their utter want of good breeding. There was so much *opinion* in their remarks—so much *feeling* in their questions' (ibid.).

Needless to say that except for disappointment, pain, and agony, Nivedita's earning for her Indian cause at Detroit was negligible. Only Mrs Funki and Miss Christine Grinstidel, the loyal follower and disciple of Swamiji, contributed ten dollars each to her mission. The wealthier people of Detroit turned their back on Nivedita. What was great about Nivedita at Detroit was that she refused to be cowed down by the hostility shown to her at Detroit. She spoke always in the name of India's greatness and defended her guru Swamiji, most stoutly in the face of jealousy-driven attempts to malign him. And not the one to give up the battle, she strove yet to form a 'Help India' committee at Detroit and persuaded Miss Bates to be the President of the committee.

From Detroit Nivedita came back to Chicago in the last week of January 1900 to review the progress of her 'Indian' work there, and was shocked to find that Mary Hale and her associates could not collect even 'one dollar of all that were promised months ago!' (1.307). There was no progress either in the work of founding a 'Help India' group, and this made her say sorrowfully that her difficulties at Chicago

seemed to be 'endless'. She found a ray of hope around this time in Chicago in the suggestion of a public school Principal that she relate the Indian mythological and historical stories to children in American schools, make a book out of those stories and earn ten percent royalties on the book. The idea was that Nivedita make her 'service to Educ. in this rich country pay for [her] right to educate in the poor' (1.314). The idea appealed to Nivedita, though the task of writing about the Indian greats, as she said, was as difficult as putting 'the rainbow under a tumbler' (1.333).

The undertaking also meant that along with her writing enterprise, Nivedita had to continue her lecture-tours in American cities. On 31 January 1900 she spoke at the Contemporary Club of Indianapolis and earned fifty dollars from the lecture. In the first week of February she moved to Kansas City of Missouri hoping to deliver lectures there. Unfortunately, Kansas City was slow in arranging lectures, prompting Nivedita to say that she did not see any prospect of help there. Living on a shoestring budget and earning small amounts from her lectures, Nivedita developed 'money-nervousness' at this time, which made her doubt the wisdom of spending money on journeys that served no purpose.

From Kansas City via Minneapolis, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and New York City, Nivedita came back to Chicago in early April 1900 and kept working there on her book of Indian stories. At this time, she kept looking for a publisher for her finished book, *Kali the Mother*. Her plan was to earn money from her books and use the earnings for the education of women in India. During her stay in Chicago in April 1900, Nivedita had a speaking invitation from Dr Janes of the Elm Street Church of Chicago where she shared the platform with Pratapchandra Mozoomdar, the Brahmo Samaj leader from

Calcutta. With reference to Dr Jane's invitation, Nivedita writes, 'Of course I shall say—by all means—greater fun if I come after [Mazoomdar], though! I don't want a specially-arranged combat for myself—to show off in' (1.330). Nivedita's comment was enough of a revelation on Mazoomdar's role in America as a detractor of Swamiji. Nivedita had an earnings of ten dollars from this lecture (*ibid.*).

Nivedita kept working at a furious pace at Chicago in order to finish her book on tales from India. As she wrote in her 24 April 1900 letter: 'Now about this last week, I wrote a story a day for four days—Sati—Uma—Sita and Rama in 3 parts ... Friday and Saturday I spent dictating to a stenographer' (1.337). By 12th May, she finished writing fourteen stories. With Chicago becoming as hot as Calcutta around the middle of May, writing became wearisome for Nivedita. All the same, she kept working, hoping to complete the book in two days. In her letter of 18 May 1900, Nivedita records that all her enterprise in producing the book of tales from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, and the history of India came to naught with Scribner—the publisher—who declined to publish it on the ground that what Nivedita produced was really far above the standard of children in American public schools, and as such *it* could not be published and used for schools in America. Nivedita was heart-broken, not for herself, but for her 'poor babies' in India. If the book met the requirements of the public schools in America, she 'might have made almost unlimited money by it' (1.347). She rued the opportunity lost and with the labour of so many months on the book lost in consequence, she felt 'weary to death' (1.346).<sup>21</sup>

In order to bring relief to her exhausted nerves and recover from the physical fatigue, Nivedita left Chicago for Cleveland. She spent

a few days there in the company of a Catholic lady, a Miss Walton, an ardent admirer of Swami Vivekananda. The restfulness that she allowed herself there, sitting in a wood amongst the sweet briar and the violets and chanting 'Santih! Om!' (1.349), helped her to recuperate and regain the strength of her hardworking self.

Nivedita resumed her lecture-tour to address the Free Religious Association at Jamaica, Massachusetts on 1 June 1900. Her lectured titled 'Our Obligations to the Orient' in which she highlighted what the Orient had done for the West and the humanity. Nivedita held that Christianity in its origin was the Life and Light that came from the East. Jesus Christ, the Oriental and crucified King of Christianity, pronounced through his life that love and forgiveness were the principal ethos of the creed that he gave birth to. Further, in exhorting 'Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will refresh you!' (1.352), the Son of God underlined *inclusiveness* as a high principle of Christianity, from which unfortunately for humanity, later Christianity deviated when it declared that 'salvation is not a great universal fact of human life, but something only to be found through the medium of their Church' (1.351). Nivedita went on to say that 'the same has been true of the Moslem faith, which divides the whole world into the Faithful and the Infidels' (ibid.). Such exclusiveness on the part of both Christianity and Islam resulted in the faults of militarism and imperialism. The genius of the East, of Hinduism particularly, on the other hand, lay in inclusiveness, in its talent to 'include the opposed unities in a larger *federal* unity' (ibid.).

By pronouncing a higher synthesis to this effect that 'the only way of reconciling differences is to *include* them' (ibid.) and that 'creeds are but different paths to reach the same goal of God-realization', Sri Ramakrishna, the greatest of the

nineteenth century-India's knowers of Brahman, effected a second renaissance, giving the whole humanity the unity of a prayer to lead *it* from the *unreal* of divisive exclusiveness to the *real* of universal inclusiveness. Calling this FREEDOM, the religious freedom of the intellect in a new religious era and the second Renaissance, Nivedita observes: 'Today it is not the discovery of Greece that has changed the face of the world—but the discovery of INDIA' (1.353).

It was also great of India, said Nivedita, to solve the problem of distinction between philosophy and mythology of religion. In pronouncing the truth of Oneness as the ultimate goal of religion and in subjecting both philosophy and mythology to serve that ultimate truth, Hinduism, unlike Christianity, was able to solve this

Pratapchandra Mozoomdar





problem. Whereas the Christian Church had no room for men who, for Truth's sake, bade farewell to Christianity, Hinduism had the genius to accommodate one and all. As to how Hinduism did *it*, is a question best answered in the beautiful language of Nivedita:

In that great civilisation, spending its national energy on Religion, there is in the mind of the commonest peasant, *an unbroken series from the fetish-worship of the savage, or the cupboard-love of the baby, on to the impatience of all images and symbols and gifts, of the Saint who sees GOD by direct perception of the soul, the Brahmag-nani as he is called—a direct unbroken series.*

And the crisis that proves the destiny of sainthood is the moment when it comes to a man to say 'all this is untrue. I will have no more to do with forms ...

'I will break the dream—this dream of the unreal—I will merge myself with uncreated Fire ... *so* panteth my soul after Thee—O Thou True!' (1.354–5)

The lecture as cited above was 'more successful' (1.360) than Nivedita imagined. After months of argument, opposition, criticism, and even ridicule, she was happy that her lectures were eliciting a warm response and appreciation from her audience. This trend continued in New York where she arrived in early June. On 4 June 1900, she spoke to the Orthodox Congregation Ministers', suggesting a 'new policy in the mission field' (ibid.) and she was appreciated on what she said. As she records in her 6 June 1900 letter: 'One came up and said "God bless you! I am nearly 90 years of age and I say: God bless you my child and your work?"' (ibid.)

The most moving lecture that Nivedita gave at New York, before she left for Paris on 28 June 1900 to attend the Congress of the History of Religions and to act as Secretary to Prof Patrick Geddes, the organiser of the various sessions of

the International Association at the Congress, was on 'The Ideals of Hindu Women'. Despite the picture of India and her women, as presented by Ramabai and her supporters, Nivedita won the hearts of American women with her beautiful portrayal of the everyday life and thought of Hindu women. She herself was so happy that her presentation roused so much interest in her audience and that her answers to their queries were so well-received that she was convinced that she was able to disabuse their minds of the distorted picture of the life of women in India, planting in its place a clearer idea of life in India than they had known before. Nivedita's greatest appreciation however came from her guru. Swamiji attended this lecture of Nivedita's. It was for the last time in his life that he heard Nivedita address a western audience on a typical Indian topic. 'He found her moving, simple, and fervent, more Hindu than a Hindu, speaking on the land of her soul, as luminous as light itself.'<sup>22</sup> And he could not but weep with joy in bringing to fruition a disciple who struggled and suffered, never giving up in the face of adversity, and thus becoming worthy of the trust the Guru had placed in her. It was such a fulfilling moment for Nivedita.

## Conclusion

Right through her struggles from November 1899 to June 1900, whenever Nivedita would show signs of weariness, Swamiji would come forward to keep her morale up or buoy up her drooping spirits. A review of some of Swamiji's letters shows how inspiring he was all through to Nivedita. When Nivedita was groaning, finding herself up against a wall in Chicago, Swamiji inspired her to keep going in the following words: 'If you are really ready to take the world's burden, take it by all means. ... The man who really takes the burden blesses the world

and goes his own way. ... not because there was no evil but that he has taken it on his own shoulders willingly, voluntarily.<sup>23</sup>

Up against the awfully fanatic behaviour of the 'Church women' of Detroit, when Nivedita was at once angry and anguished over their insolent behaviour towards her, solace came from her guru in the following words: 'We are all sacrifices—each in his own way. The great worship is going on—no one can see its meaning except that it is a great sacrifice' (6.422). To a despondent Nivedita, nervous over very little fund collection, came the Master's words of assurance that 'Things have got to come round—the seed must die underground to come up as the tree' (6.430). When Nivedita's talks evoked a favourable response from the audience, the guru wrote to her saying, 'All blessings on you', but advised her all the same not to be carried away by 'gold or anything else' (8.522).

Eventually, it is through the guru's blessings that Nivedita's fund collection in the US came to a decent amount. Her own collection out of her eight month long lecture tour and voluntary subscriptions was only five hundred dollars. Mrs Francis H Leggett gifted her one thousand dollars. Knowing that one thousand five hundred dollars was hardly enough to enable Nivedita to run her school for girls and women in Calcutta, Swamiji came forward and persuaded Mrs C P Huntington of New York, a wealthy and liberal-hearted lady, to contribute five thousand dollars to Nivedita to help her cause for the education of Indian women. As Nivedita writes in her letter of 26 June 1900: 'Yesterday Mrs. C. P. Huntington gave me \$5000 and Swami [Vivekananda] says there is no longer any secret ... Mrs. H. looks forward to ... making a further yearly donation to the school ... Swami says that the interest on the present sum of \$6500 will give me in Calcutta a monthly income of at least 50 Rs. and

that that, with what I may gain in the next few months will be enough to begin upon. So he wants me to leave for Calcutta next January or Feb.!!! Isn't that joyful?'<sup>24</sup>

Joyful it was for Nivedita on another count. She longed for a permanent guild in America to help her in her cause of education for the Indian women after she left America. That dream too came to be fulfilled, with the Ramakrishna Guild of Help in America being set up, of which her Guru's friends and disciples such as Mrs Francis Leggett, Mrs Ole Bull, Miss J MacLeod, and Miss Christine Greenstidel, were the chief patrons.

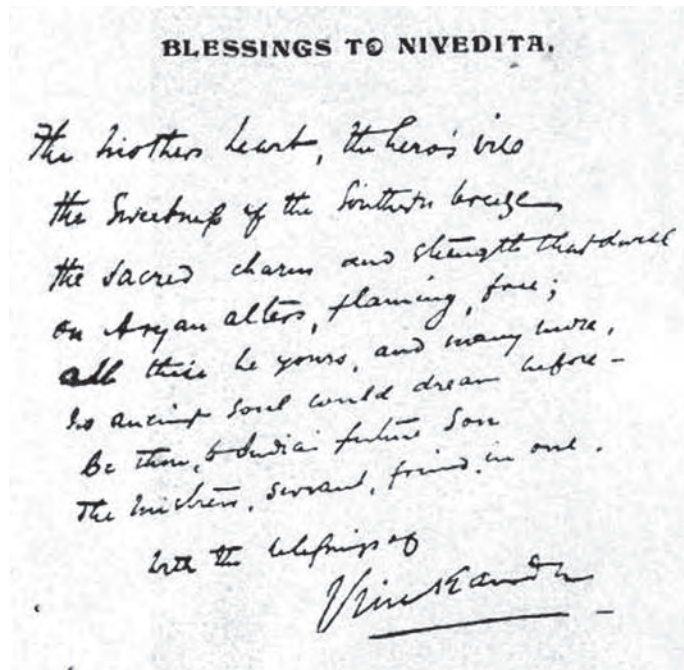
To sum up, Nivedita fought a formidable war against the plague in Calcutta. She was engaged in an equally uphill struggle in India for the cause of women's education in India. The analysis presented in this article of her struggles for India in the East and West establishes her not only as a fighter extraordinary for India, but throws light also on the salient characteristics of a true fighter to this effect that such a fighter is one who would rather die fighting for the cause of doing good to others than give way,<sup>25</sup> that such fighting inevitably entails intense suffering that a true fighter takes in her or his stride (6.419), and that such suffering eventually brings in the divine grace to the true fighter. Such is the message that Swamiji wanted Nivedita to absorb in the course of her struggles for India with a view to turning her into an extraordinary fighter of the 'mistress, servant, friend in one' of India (6.178).

Nivedita showed through her life's work that all her struggles for India sprang from her motivation to fulfil the role her guru wanted her to play in dedicating her to India. To her, Swamiji was synonymous with India. As Nivedita, she was always up to the fact of her *dedication*. As she affirmed: 'You see, Swamiji always thought I ought to do that ... and I *would* like to feel that I had been His right hand.'<sup>26</sup>

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## Notes and References

1. For a fuller discussion of Sister Nivedita's socio-religious and political ideas, see Mamata Ray and Anil Baran Ray, *India and The Dedicated* (Kolkata: Manuscript India, 2003), 336.
2. Margaret's mother, Mary Noble, found it hard to maintain the family in England in the wake of husband Samuel's death, and returned with her two children—May and Richmond, the sister and brother of Margaret—to Ireland to live with her father, Richard Hamilton.
3. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 2.461.
4. Barbara Foxe, *Long Journey Home* (London: Rider and Company, 1975), 29.
5. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.24.
6. Lizelle Raymond, *The Dedicated* (Madras: Samata, 1985), 53.
7. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 8.406.
8. *The Dedicated*, 153.
9. *Long Journey Home*, 75.
10. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1982), 1.107.
11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 5.30.
12. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 7.220.
13. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.35.
14. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 7.511.
15. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.188.
16. *The Dedicated*, 215.
17. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.239.
18. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1.20.
19. Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1999), 105.
20. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.297.
21. Nivedita had to wait till 1907 for her book to be published by Longmans and Green of London with the title *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*.
22. *The Dedicated*, 219.
23. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 7.521.
24. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.367-8.
25. See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 6.420.
26. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.819.





# ***An Imperial Japanese Visitor in Colonial India***

## ***—Exchange, Resistance, and Formations of Asian Modernity***

**Gita V Pai**

**H**OW DID A JAPANESE TRAVELLER in the early twentieth century understand modernity and Asia while operating within colonial Indian spaces? Japanese art critic Kakuzo Tenshin Okakura met Indian monk Swami Vivekananda and his Irish-born devotee, Margaret E Noble when he visited India from 1901–2. Swamiji brought Hinduism to the status of world religion during Chicago's 1893 Parliament of the Religions. Margaret E Noble—later renamed Sister Nivedita—wrote extensively about Hindu culture, Indian nationalism, and women's issues. Okakura penned two of his four books, *Ideals of the East* and *The Awakening of the East* in Calcutta where he intermingled with Bengali nationalists.

Surendranath Tagore, nephew of Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore, describes the Japanese visitor's eleven-month Indian sojourn: at the Tagore family home near Calcutta, Okakura worked on his 'next book on the Awakening of Asia' while the Bengali elite 'spent wildly exhilarating evenings, sitting round his table, listening to his glowing passages deploring the White Disaster spreading over the East, in its intellectual and spiritual surrender to the western cult



*Kakuzō Okakura (1862–1913)*

of Mammon.<sup>1</sup> Unpublished in his lifetime, 'The Awakening of the East' expresses Okakura's desire to awaken Indians to the calls of nationalism.<sup>2</sup> As a powerful denunciation of Western imperialism, this political project of Asian solidarity draws from Vivekananda and Nivedita's messages of spiritual reawakening, their specific warnings about the spirit-numbing effects of Western materialism, and their concerns of Asian submissiveness.

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Examining Okakura's literary output in British-ruled India against the words of Swamiji and in particular Nivedita, this paper understands the encounters between Japanese and South Asian intellectuals or activists during the beginning of the twentieth century, a period of high empire for imperialists in Japan and nationalists in India. Through a close reading of 'The Awakening of the East', this paper analyses a visiting Japanese scholar's intention to invoke in an Indian readership his style of confrontation with Western civilisation and his fervent belief in pan-Asianist responses to the threat of Western imperialism. Okakura's interactions with Vivekananda and Nivedita demonstrate the transnational resistance of Asian literati whose language of interaction was ironically English. These Japanese and South Asian individuals from differing but related cultural and political traditions met in the colonial metropolis of Calcutta to challenge Western supremacy collaboratively and imaginatively within and across the material and conceptual space of modern Asia.

### **Swami Vivekananda: A Monk from India**

Swamiji brought Hinduism to the status of a major world religion during the Parliament of the Religions held in conjunction with the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago that celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' voyage to America. The Parliament intended to demonstrate the West's supremacy in matters of religion and spirit, as the Exposition exhibited the West's material and technological superiority; yet, it brought together people of various faiths and cultures to talk to each other.

Swamiji represented India as a delegate, introduced Hinduism, and spoke of the tolerance and universality of India's spiritual traditions. After delivering his inspiring speech, he spent the next three years lecturing in the United States and

Britain, presenting the Indian philosophies of Vedanta to the Western world and raising inter-faith awareness.<sup>3</sup> Upon his return to India in 1897, many hailed Swamiji as a champion of Hinduism: He 'thundered from Cape Comorin on the southern tip of India to the Himalayas'<sup>4</sup> delivering his message of nationalism which 'came as a tonic to the depressed and demoralized Hindu mind' (337).

According to historian B G Gokhale, three ideas dominate in Swamiji's speeches and writings after his Indian homecoming: One, his supreme mission had a historical imperative. Two, his conviction of the indestructible Indian soul and the invincible Indian spirit. Three, his belief that nationalism could be a valuable instrument for the fulfilment of India's destiny. Gokhale explains: Swamiji 'effectively used his interpretation of Indian history and culture and his observations of the Western world to make his message convincing, and to turn it into a new philosophy of Indian nationalism.'<sup>5</sup> In other words, he constructed Hinduism in universal terms that gave the emerging Indian nationalist discourse its force and direction.<sup>6</sup>

As 'the motherland of philosophy, of spirituality, and of ethics, of sweetness, gentleness, and love,' India to Swamiji was the 'first and foremost of all the nations of the world.'<sup>7</sup> However, such a land consumed by materialism could rise again (3.149), and Swamiji saw it as his mission to awaken Indians to this possibility:

The longest night seems to be passing away, the sorest trouble seems to be coming to an end at last, the seeming corpse appears to be awaking and a voice is coming to us—away back where history and even tradition fails to peep into the gloom of the past, coming down from there, reflected as it were from peak to peak of the infinite Himalaya of knowledge, and of love, and of work, India, this motherland of ours—a voice is coming unto us, gentle, firm, and yet unmistakable in

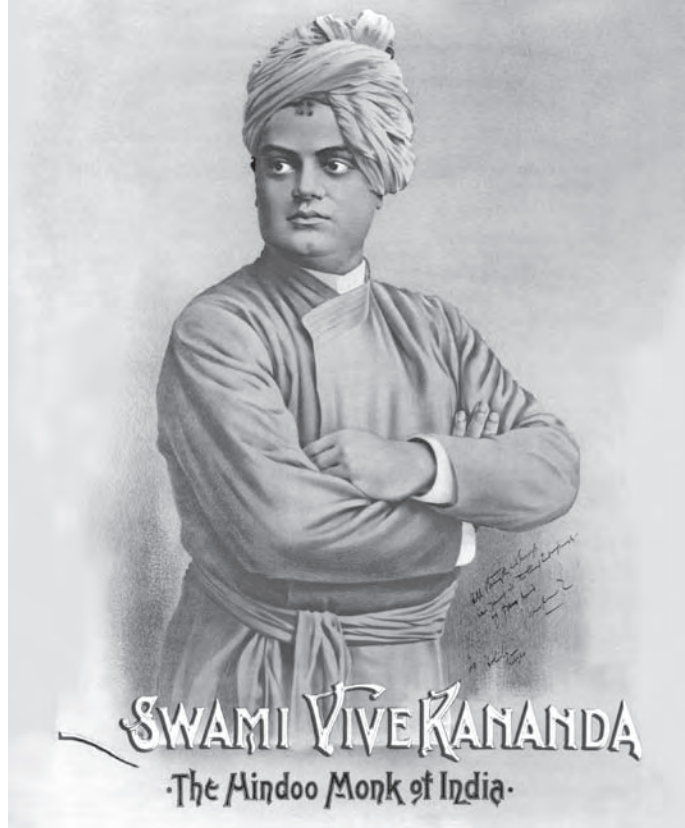
its utterances, and is gaining volume as days pass by, and behold, the sleeper is awakening! Like a breeze from the Himalayas, it is bringing life into the almost dead bones and muscles, the lethargy is passing away, and only the blind cannot see, or the perverted will not see, that she is awakening, this motherland of ours, from her deep long sleep. None can resist her any more; never is she going to sleep any more; no outward powers can hold her back any more; for the infinite giant is rising to her feet (3.145-6).

Further, modernisation meant reform not only in a mental sense: the awakening of the nation or national regeneration was achieved through religion, although Swamiji did not diminish the importance of a political and social reform movement: 'When the life-blood is strong and pure, no disease germ can live in that body. Our life-blood is spirituality. If it flows clear, if it flows strong and pure and vigorous, everything is right; political, social, any other material defects, even the poverty of the land, will all be cured if that blood is pure' (3.288).

Spirituality plays an important role in awakening the Indian spirit, a spirit he saw as invincible, and the Indian soul as indestructible: 'The Indian nation cannot be killed. Deathless it stands and it will stand so long as that spirit shall remain as the background, so long as her people do not give up their spirituality. Beggars they may remain, poor and poverty-stricken; dirt and squalor may surround them perhaps throughout all time, but let them not give up their God, let them not forget that they are the children of the sages' (4.160).

Both a sense of Hindu spiritual greatness and its Hindu mystical faith fed into the development of Indian nationalism. Swamiji was convinced that nationalism in India could be an effective movement only if it acquired a religious essence.

Let us all work hard, my brethren; this is no time for sleep. On our work depends the coming of the India of the future. She is there ready



waiting. She is only sleeping. Arise and awake and see her seated here on her eternal throne, rejuvenated, more glorious than she ever was -- this motherland of ours. The idea of God was nowhere else ever so fully developed as in this motherland of ours, for the same idea of God never existed anywhere else (3.154).

### ***Okakura Tenshin: A Scholar from Japan***

Japanese nationalist art historian Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913) also took part in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Nearly fifty nations participated in the fair, including Japan, whose exhibit incorporated a little temple modelled on an ancient and weather-beaten temple near Kyoto. Okakura directed the Japanese exhibition.<sup>8</sup> Although Okakura and Swamiji were both present at the Chicago's World Fair, they never met.

Wealthy American socialite Josephine MacLeod would introduce the two men. After the 1893 Parliament, the once unknown



Vivekananda became somewhat of a celebrity—from 1893 to 1895, Swamiji travelled widely in the US to deliver his spiritual message as a speaker and preacher. While the American Renaissance had already created a favourable climate for Indian ideas, it was Swamiji who laid the foundations for Vedanta in the US and later in Britain. After hearing Swamiji speak during his 1895 New York lecture, MacLeod became his devotee, dedicating her life towards his Ramakrishna Math and Mission and living part-time in its Belur Math headquarters near Calcutta.

During a six-month visit to Japan in 1901, MacLeod attended Okakura Tenshin's classes on the history of Japanese art at the Tokyo Bijutsu Gakko, Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where he was also its principal. Once the leading curator of the Japanese section of the Imperial Museum of Japan and creator of Japan's leading art magazine *Kokka*, Okakura was also founder of a radical art school called Nippon Bijitsuin, Academy of Fine Arts

Okakura Kakuzo



of Japan, when MacLeod heard his lecture. Influenced by Ernest Fenollosa, the Harvard-trained professor of philosophy at Tokyo University, Okakura supported preserving traditional Japanese art from the modernisation and Westernisation of the early Meiji Restoration period.

Impressed, MacLeod wanted Swamiji to meet Okakura. 'I am glad you are enjoying Japan', wrote Swamiji in one of his letters to her, 'especially Japanese art. You are perfectly correct in saying that we will have to learn many things from Japan ... Certainly it is very desirable to establish a connection between India and Japan.'<sup>9</sup> When Swamiji could not travel because of ill health, MacLeod brought Okakura to him. Okakura journeyed to India not only to see Swamiji and invite him to speak at his Japanese Parliament of Religions in Kyoto, but to also escape his struggling art school.

On meeting Okakura in early January 1902, Swamiji proclaimed: 'We are two brothers who meet again, having come from the ends of the earth' (123). Later, Okakura said to MacLeod after their discussions about religion, 'Vivekananda is ours. He is an Oriental. He is not yours.'<sup>10</sup> As head of the Japanese Committee for the Restoration of the Old Temples, Okakura wished to visit the Buddhist sites in India, and asked Swamiji to accompany him, MacLeod, and a few others as their guide. In Bodh Gaya, the site where the Buddha received his awakening, Swamiji explained the architecture of the Mahabodhi temple and the historicity of its images. From Gaya, the party journeyed to the Hindu holy city of Benares and Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first lecture. Okakura also visited the Buddhist monastic caves of Ajanta.

Okakura then traveled to Calcutta where he edited and revised *The Ideals of the East*, a nationalistic treatise famous for its 'Asia is one,' a statement of pan-Asian unity underlying

Oriental art. The lectures MacLeod heard while in Japan provided the book's primary content. Okakura finished his manuscript under the editorial supervision of Swamiji's Irish-born devotee Margaret Noble, later renamed Sister Nivedita, 'the dedicated one', when she became a member of Vivekananda's Hinduist Ramakrishna movement in 1898 as a Hindu brahmacharini, celibate novice. Okakura defines not only the artistic heritage of Japan and links Asia through Buddhism and art, but he also lays the boundaries of what it means to be Japanese.

In *The Ideals of the East*, Okakura speaks of a common Asia through a shared aesthetic past anchored in Buddhism; however, he also highlights the progress of Japanese history and identifies the intellectual inheritances and heroes that created modern Japan. Granted that Okakura is celebrated for his declaration that Asia is one, he distinguishes between the Orient and Asiatic, where the Orient represented the backward and decayed, like India and China, and the un-colonised Japan represented the developed, the Asiatic.<sup>11</sup>

While the intervening chapters were drawn from lectures Okakura had earlier given in Japan, *The Ideals of the East*'s opening and final chapter on Asian ideals in society and art were most likely redrafted in response to suggestions made by Nivedita—they are proclamations calling for the revival of traditional practices and values and for pan-Asiatic unity in the face of encroaching Westernisation. In her introduction to *The Ideals of the East*, Nivedita invokes her fierce hostility to colonialism: 'It would almost seem as if it were the destiny of imperial peoples to be conquered in turn by the religious ideas of their subjects.'<sup>12</sup>

Okakura would develop this idea of colonisation further in his second work, 'The Awakening of the East'.<sup>13</sup> He wrote the manuscript with Nivedita's help while in the company of Calcutta luminaries such as Abanindranath and

Rabindranath Tagore to whom Nivedita introduced.<sup>14</sup> Okakura, like Nivedita, opposed the passivity that had afflicted Indian society and contributed to the struggle against its domination by the British.

### ***The Awakening of the East***

Great Britain's colonisation of India and Swamiji's message of nationalism inspired Okakura to think of a new missionary role for modern Asia and the spiritual reformation of Asian people. Okakura possibly copied the title of his work from Swamiji's journal *Prabuddha Bharata* or *Awakened India* founded in 1896. Okakura borrowed the first words of the text—albeit a gender reversal—from the beginning of Swamiji's famous 1893 Welcome Address at the Chicago Parliament of the Religions: 'Sisters and Brothers of America!'<sup>15</sup> Perhaps he found inspiration in Vivekananda's 1898 poem, 'To the Awakened India' (4.387–9). Vivekananda's message was one of national awakening—he wanted to rouse Hindus to the political, economic, and spiritual shackles that had debased and weakened India.

Okakura begins his critical, anti-imperialist 'The Awakening of the East' with an Asia that shares a mutual humiliation before the West:

Brothers and Sisters of Asia!

A vast suffering is on the land of our ancestors. The Oriental has become a synonym for the effeminate, the native is an epithet for the slave. Our lauded gentleness is the irony which alien courtesy owes to cowardice. In the name of commerce we have welcomed the militant, in the name of civilization we have embraced the imperialistic, in the name of Christianity we have prostrated before the merciless ...

We have wandered long amongst ideals, let us awaken once more to the actual. We have drifted on the river of apathy, let us land once more on the cruel shore of reality. We have isolated ourselves from one another, in the pride of

a crystalline containedness [sic]. Let us dissolve ourselves now in the ocean of a common misery. The guilty consciousness of the West has often conjured up the spectre of a Yellow Peril, let the tranquil gaze of the East turn itself upon the White Disaster. I call you not to violence but to manhood. I call you not to aggression but to self consciousness ... The glory of Europe is the humiliation of Asia!<sup>16</sup>

Okakura describes eloquently India's colonised state, where the subjugation is not only economic, but also spiritual, intellectual, and cultural erosion:

The gaunt image of India, here, rises before me with an inexpressible sadness,—India, the fatherland of noble ideals and nobler deeds, garlanded with the dreams of heroic Kurukshetra and mighty Maghada, of learned Nalanda and beaming Benares, of Sita and Sivaji, of Vikramaditya and Akbar, of Jhansi and Govind Singh. But I see before me today an orphaned child of Asia seeking in vain that parental care which she has lost forever. I see the India of rajas and nawabs, their starry breasts heavy with the jeweled orders of dishonor, of snowheaded pundits hiding from the young the ancient glory which they must no remember, of dim zenanas where patriotic tears fall on embroidered saris, of national congresses which dare not protest, or economic enterprises which they can not protect, of rice-fields scorched by famine, of bazaars rioting in the plague, of memorials marbled with shame. The Himalayas bow their heads down to the plains in this mute agony. Does not the British Blue-book reveal the demoniac secret of their systematic impoverishment? Do not the Englishmen's own statistics prove that the daily income of Indians was two pence in 1850 and is only three farthings in 1900!? What can they expect? Wolves are made to devour, sheep can but bleat. We have still the shadow of grandeur, they have only a memory of mutiny.

Industrial conquest is awful, moral subjugation is intolerable. Our ancestral ideals, our family institutions, our ethics, our religions are

daily fading away. Each succeeding generation loses moral stamina by contact with the Westerners ...

We have bowed to their armaments, we have surrendered to their merchandise, why not be vanquished by their so-called culture? ... Shame to our mothers that they bore a race of slaves! Shame to our daughter that they shall wed a race of cowards!' (1.141–3).

Okakura tries to understand the power of European civilisation and its hold over Asia, despite an underlying historical unity among Asian cultures. He sees that Asian countries are separated by a lack of external contacts and a focus on internal problems:

The mutual isolation of Asiatic countries prevents them from comprehending the appalling situation in its total significance. Engrossed in bewildering struggles of their won, they disregard the fact that the self-same misfortune has befallen their neighbours ...

The unity of the Asiatic consciousness in spirit and form is most apparent in our art whose subtle refinement far transcends the amateurish coarseness of Western creations (1.144, 147).

With 'the unity of the Asiatic consciousness in spirit and form,' Okakura draws possibly from Vivekananda's Vedantic oneness of spirit or Advaita, a non-duality without qualification.<sup>17</sup> According to Okakura, it remains the central question around which Asia can be awakened, an awakening that requires an aggressive nature. European civilisation, despite its powerful position is based on narrow principles, and is therefore in a historically inferior position. Yet, it has emerged as a powerful force and this is because of nationalism. Perhaps the lack of territory in Europe has led to the development of a very strong sense of nationality that has allowed Europeans to overrun Asia, which has been a tolerant civilisation that has sought virtue in self-sacrifice.



In *The Awakening of the East*, Okakura also borrows from his initial meeting with Vivekananda, in particular the Indian monk's greeting about two brothers 'who meet again having come from the ends of the earth'<sup>18</sup> that emphasises their Asian kinship, before he calls for a violent resistance to Western supremacy and Asian humility: 'We meet today as brothers after a long separation brooding over the dear ones that are gone, seeking in each other's eyes the consolation neither dared express. In India we greet the elder noting with tears his care-worn face, his manly stoop, his shaking pride. In Japan we welcome the younger, feel his growing limbs, take pride in secret over the absurd swagger which we join chaffing. A last, at least we are met again. Om! To the Spirit of Asia'<sup>19</sup>, 'Our recovery is Consciousness. Our remedy is—The Sword' (1.156). 'The West on the other hand through its incessant thirst for domination has developed the concrete notion of nationality in each of its limited territories' (1.157). 'But our Asiatic notions of scale lead us to unconsciously magnify the area of Western achievement' (1.158).

The Japanese are to provide the example for both China and India to emulate, which would then bring about Asiatic harmony. As art historian John Clark notes, 'The Awakening of the East' would 'embody most particularly the imbrication of his thought in ways which saw Japan as expanding into Asia as the representative of the restitutive re-assertion of 'Asian' values.'<sup>20</sup> Okakura saw Japan as the gravitational center, a sentiment he expressed also in 'The Awakening of the East': 'The brilliant resurrection of Japan is very instructive as an instance of Asiatic revival.'<sup>21</sup> 'And a mighty Asiatic peace shall come to clothe humanity with universal harmony. And Europe shall receive the blessing of Asia given with a freer if a firmer hand' (1.165).

### **Sister Nivedita: A Teacher from Ireland**

Towards the end of his 'The Awakening of the East', Okakura invokes through her weapon, Kali, the sword wielding, fierce form of the Hindu goddess Parvati: 'Om to the Steel of honour! Om to the Strong! Om to the Invincible!' (1.166). On one level, this surprising insertion suggests the influence of Swamiji, who not only believed in the dynamic oneness, but also in the divine energy of Kali. For him, the goddess was a symbol of life and death, the giver of life and the destroyer, the great mother of the universe, the womb of the earth of India.<sup>22</sup>

In Okakura's text, however Kali appears in the crisis faced by her native sons; she symbolises the destruction of the colonizer and the rebirth of India:

Thou art Life, for thy face mirrors Death! Cowardice shrinks before thy halo; pride seeks in thee glory; shame seeks in thee revenge; demons ask of thee carnage and blood. But the brave only calls for Freedom. Thou alone cleavest the fetter of an enthralled race! ... Sleep on, for the hand of Kālī shall awaken thee to gleam as gleam the teeth of lightning when the storm laughs on the clouds.<sup>23</sup>

To understand 'The Awakening of the East' is to consider not only



Swamiji, who died in July 1902, but more so his Irish adherent. In her 1902 letters, Nivedita mentions often the Japanese scholar whom she called Nigu, 'concealed' in Sanskrit; in one dated 25 July 1902, she even writes that she was 'revising a short second thing of Nigu's—which has taken time'.<sup>24</sup> Okakura's Kali inclusion signals the input of Nivedita,<sup>25</sup> who inherited her love and devotion for Kali from her Bengali guru. Her adoption of Kali as the 'avatar of her worship' occurred within a year of arriving in Calcutta.<sup>26</sup> Encouraged by Swamiji, a native of Calcutta, she delivered lectures on Kali as early as 1899 to her Bengali audience,<sup>27</sup> for whom the goddess is particularly significant: 'Kali and Her Worship' and 'Kali Worship'.<sup>28</sup> Her identification with Kali is further exemplified in her first book, *Kali, the Mother* (1900), a collection of impassioned essays on goddess worship (1.465–512). In it, Nivedita writes of Kali and her sword: 'Deep in the heart of hearts of Mine own flashes the sacrificial knife of Kali. Worshippers of the Mother are they from their birth in Her incarnation of the sword. Lovers of death are they—not lovers of life—and of storm and stress' (1.501).

By 1902, Nivedita had accepted Kali as a nationalist symbol. Through her, Okakura became aware of the fearsome Hindu goddess as the icon of Bengali Hindu nationalism, for by the time they met, Nivedita had decided to choose 'Kali to fire Indians into action'.<sup>29</sup>

An odd and abrupt addition about 'Oriental Womanhood' in 'The Awakening of the East' also denotes Nivedita's guidance. Okakura writes of female subordination and freedom:

The West has often accused the East of a lack of Freedom. Truly we have not that crude notion of personal rights guarded by mutual assertions—that perpetual elbowing through the crowd—that constant snarling over the bones, which seems to be the glory of the Occident.

Our conceptions of liberty are far higher than these. With us it lies in the power to complete the individual ideal within itself. The true infinity is the circle, not the extended line. Every organism implies a subordination of parts to a whole. Real equality lies in the due fulfillment of the respective function. Oriental womanhood finds its freest scope in the Mother, the Wife, and the Daughter rather than in the doubtful privileges of an unnatural masculinity.<sup>30</sup>

Nivedita would express related thoughts about equality in her essay, 'Of The Hindu Woman As Wife,' where she observes that the Hindu wife's 'characteristic emotion' was 'passionate reverence'. Her prostrating before him and touching her head to his feet 'is not equality. No. But who talks of a vulgar equality, asks the Hindu wife, when she may have instead the unspeakable blessedness of offering worship?'<sup>31</sup>

When Nivedita as Margaret Noble met Swamiji during his London public lectures in 1895, she worked as a teacher in Northern Ireland. She found arresting not only Swamiji's theme of universality, but also his desire to help Indian women. After narrating the pathetic plight of women in his country, Swamiji invited her to work towards female education as a way to awaken India beginning in 1898.<sup>32</sup> Subsequently, Nivedita supported women's education in India and established a girls' school in Calcutta to improve women's lives.<sup>33</sup> She even spoke about the Oriental woman; for example, her 7 October 1902 talk in Bombay was entitled 'The Virtues of Indian Womanhood'. She also wrote extensively about women: 'Of the Hindu Woman as Wife', 'Love Strong as Death', 'The Place of Woman in the National Life', and 'The Immediate Problems of the Oriental Woman' appeared in *The Web of Indian Life* (1904), her commentaries on Indian culture which she wrote from 1901 to 1903 (2.27–85).

By 1902, however, Nivedita began to question her life of service to 'Oriental Women' in her 24 July letter to Josephine Macleod, she deliberates the practicality of female upliftment against a burgeoning nationalist mission:

We talk of 'woman-making.' But the great stream of the Oriental woman's life flows on—who am I that I should seek in anyway to change it? Suppose even that I could add my impress to 10 or 12 girls—would it be so much gain? Is it not rather by taking the *national* consciousness of the women like that of the men, and getting it towards greater problems and responsibilities, that one can help? ... I don't know. This may all be my own sophistry, I cannot tell. Only I think my task is to awake a nation, not to influence a few women.<sup>34</sup>

Nivedita's decision to promote Indian nationalism over her social work and educational project in 1902 explains the fiery and passionate tone in Okakura's 'The Awakening of the East' that renders it more anti-Western and anti-colonial than his earlier *The Ideals of the East*. From 1900–2, Nivedita anguished over her separation from Swamiji because of his demanding lecture circuit and his increasing retreat from the world due to ill health. She would decide to transfer Swamiji's teachings directly into the arena of nationalist politics.<sup>35</sup> Since the Mission forbade any political activity, emphasising that 'the aims and ideals of the Mission being purely spiritual and humanitarian' (141), Nivedita resigned from the Ramakrishna Mission to pursue a nationalist agenda after Swamiji's death on 4 July 1902. She arrived at 'the conclusion that organized political resistance, needed to be employed against the British presence in India if cultural pride and national self-sufficiency were to be (re)generated'.<sup>36</sup> It is during this moment of radical change in her work that Nivedita interacted with Okakura in India.<sup>37</sup>

When Nivedita helped translate Swamiji's message of spiritual reawakening and his

anxieties about Asian passivity into Okakura's treatise, she also lent 'The Awakening of the East' its vociferous and often violent tones of nationalism when she was becoming politically inclined towards India. In her 10 June 1901 letter to Josephine MacLeod, Nivedita expressed: 'I belong to *Hinduism* more than I ever did. But I see the *political* need so clearly too!'<sup>38</sup> Before she quit the Ramakrishna Mission on 18 July 1902, she would stress her devotion to nationalist activism: 'I have identified myself with the idea of Mother India, I have become the idea itself'.<sup>39</sup>

Okakura's choice of the Indian youth as his target audience for his book points also to Nivedita's influence. While travelling in Europe and America to collect funds for her girls' school and lecture about the Hindu ideals of womanhood from mid-1899, Nivedita met Indian nationalists like Romesh Chunder Dutt, professor of Indian history at University College, London. Realising that spiritual, economic, or cultural regeneration was impossible as long as India remained under foreign rule, Nivedita accepted Dutt's invitation to inspire Indian students with her 'Reawakening of India' speech.<sup>40</sup> In early 1902, she delivered additional lectures in Madras to rouse young students to fight for Indian nationhood (153–4).<sup>41</sup> Nivedita's message of national awakening directed at India's youth would also find its way into Okakura's 'The Awakening of the East'.

While residing in Calcutta, Okakura asked his host's nephew Surendranath Tagore, to whom Nivedita introduced: 'What are you thinking of doing for the country?' The young man admitted:

Unprepared as I was for such a talk, I rambled on in reply, trying, or thinking I was trying, to convey to him how handicapped we were for making any organized attempt for the betterment of our country, and I still remember how feeble I felt in at length arriving at my lame conclusion that, as matters stood, the only thing




was for each one of us to do his little bit, leaving the cumulative effect to time.<sup>42</sup>

Okakura wrote 'The Awakening of the East' under Nivedita's assistance to impel young Indians like Surendranath towards anti-British activities. In fact, Surendranath and Okakura would collaborate to 'establish chains of secret societies—to arouse the Hindus' political sense ... the attempts were premature and failed.'<sup>43</sup> This partnership suggests that Surendranath too influenced Okakura. Okakura's association with the Tagore family because of Nivedita would leave Surendranath with this realisation about his Japanese friend's motives: 'I am assailed with more than a suspicion that it was *our* awakening that the astute Okakura was really after.'<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

Okakura Tenshin, Swamiji, and Sister Nivedita saw themselves collaboratively resisting Western imperialism as they sought Asia-based alternatives to a world dominated by the West. While this paper addresses questions regarding early twentieth-century interactions between a visiting Japanese scholar and prominent activists in India, the contact zone does not merely involve Japan and India. The West and especially the British are always a mediating factor, even if Western people are not always present. In this way, the discussion moves beyond a dichotomized perspective in which Asia and Asian modernity were interpreted only by comparisons with the West. An irony is that the West, imperialism, and often the English language made pan-Asianism possible. English language and modern education cohering with Western models in many cases gave certain Asians a basis for transnational cooperation in their anti-Westernism—that was often anti-British. This paper discusses intellectual contact zones defining pan-Asianist discourse that is neither Japanese

nor Indian nor Western. Rather the question is a shared Asian modernity.

Okakura is internationally famous for four books that he wrote in English, two of which were written in India. His second book, 'The Awakening of the East', as this paper has demonstrated, is a powerfully vociferous condemnation of Western imperialism written by an Asian writer in English with Nivedita's influence. Nivedita, whose actions and mail were under British surveillance since her 4 February 1902 'India Has No Apology To Make' speech, worried that Okakura's text would 'be enough to send us all to prison.'<sup>45</sup> Anti-Western imperialist in nature, 'The Awakening of the East' conflated Asian universalism—modified with a Japanese superiority—with both Indian nationalism and Bengali patriotism—where Japan was the model to emulate. In other words, while Okakura's treatise reflects his exchanges and interactions with South Asian intellectuals, he envisions Japan as the leader of a united Asian resistance and as the defender of the weak against Western domination. In 1903, Nivedita would feel likewise about India's position in the world: '*India* is the starting point, and the Goal, as far as I am concerned. Let *her* look after the West, if she wishes.'<sup>46</sup> In his 1906 *The Book of Tea*, Okakura would complement Nivedita's radically nationalist tone in her writings: 'It is rarely that the chivalrous pen of Lafcadio Hearn or that of the author of 'The Web of Indian Life' enlivens the Oriental darkness with the torch of our own sentiments,'<sup>47</sup> a tone that made its way into 'The Awakening of the East'. 

### Notes and References

1. Surendranath Tagore, 'Kakuzo Okakura: Some Reminiscences by Surendranath Tagore' in Okakura Kakuzo, *Collected English Writings*, ed. Sunao Nakamura (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1984), 3.237.
2. 'The Awakening of the East' was published posthumously in Japanese (1938) and English

- (1939), after the discovery of Okakura's hand-written manuscript. Japanese ultranationalists used both versions to garner support for a pan-Asian alliance in Japan and abroad. See Pekka Korhonen, 'The Geography of Okakura Tenshin,' *Japan Review*, 13 (2001), 110.
3. Vedanta (Sanskrit, 'the end of the Vedas') is one of the orthodox systems of Indian philosophy.
  4. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University, 1994), 339.
  5. B G Gokhale, 'Swami Vivekananda and Indian Nationalism,' *Journal of Bible and Religion*, 32/1 (January 1964), 37.
  6. See Indira Chowdhury-Sengupta, 'Reconstructing Hinduism on a World Platform: The World's First Parliament of Religions, Chicago 1892,' in *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice (Delhi: Oxford University, 1998), 28.
  7. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 3.147.
  8. See Judith Snodgrass, *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Columbian Exposition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2003), 29-43.
  9. Pravrajika Prabuddhaprana, *Tantine: The Life of Josephine Macleod, Friend of Swami Vivekananda* (Calcutta: Sri Sarada Math, 1990), 121.
  10. *Western Women in the Footsteps of Swami Vivekananda*, ed. Pravrajika Atmaprana (New Delhi: Ramakrishna Sarada Mission, 1995), 104.
  11. Kakuzo Okakura, *The Ideals of the East: with Special Reference to the Art of Japan* (California: Stone Bridge, 2007), 4-5, 6, 7, 8. For example: 'It has been, however, the great privilege of Japan to realize this unity-in-complexity with a special clearness. The Indo-Tartaric blood of this race was in itself a heritage which qualified it to imbibe from the two sources, and so mirror the whole of Asiatic consciousness. The unique blessing of unbroken sovereignty, the proud self-reliance of an unconquered race, and the insular isolation which protected ancestral ideas and instincts at the cost of expansion, made Japan the real repository of the trust of Asiatic thought and culture' (11). 'It is in Japan alone that the historic wealth of Asiatic culture can be consecutively studied through its treasured specimens' (12). Japan becomes the 'living museum' or 'repository' of Asia: 'Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilization; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old' (ibid.). According to historian Stefan Tanaka, Okakura 'summarized Japan's connection to and separation from Asia.' While part of the broader cultural realm of China and India, it surpassed them as it represented both the old (cultural heritage) and new (Western cultural objects and institutions). See Stefan Tanaka, 'Imaging History: Inscripting Belief in the Nation,' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53/1 (February 1994), 38.
  12. Sister Nivedita, introduction to *The Ideals of the East: with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, 7.
  13. Okakura Kakuzo, 'The Awakening of the East' in *Collected English Writings*, ed. Sunao Nakamura (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1984), 1.133-168.
  14. Okakura would meet Rabindranath Tagore again in 1913 when curator of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
  15. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 1.3.
  16. 'The Awakening of the East', 1.135-6.
  17. 'The word *advaita* means the state of not being two, and is the name applied to the great Indian doctrine that all which exist though apparently manifold, is really one. Hence all truth must be discoverable in any single differentiation, the whole universe involved in every detail. All thus becomes equally precious.' *The Ideals of the East: with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, 140.
  18. His Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 2 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2008), 2.619.
  19. 'The Awakening of the East', 1.148.
  20. John Clark, 'Okakura Tenshin [Kakuzô] and Aesthetic Nationalism,' *Arts: The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association*, 25 (2003), 78.
  21. 'The Awakening of the East', 1.163.
  22. See *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4.384.
  23. 'The Awakening of the East', 1.166.
  24. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, 2 vols (Calcutta: Nababharat, 1982), 1.486; See *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.457-525.
  25. While Shigemi Inaga and John Rosenfield

- connect Okakura to Nivedita, Inaga focuses primarily on Okakura's *Ideals of the East* and Nivedita's influence on Bengali artists (see Inaga Shigemi, 'Okakura Kakuzo's Nostalgic Journey to India and the Invention of Asia,' *CJR Japan Research Series*, (2001), 119–32; Shigemi Inaga, 'Sister Nivedita and her "Kali The Mother, The Web of Indian Life", and Art Criticism: New Insights into Kakuzo Okakura's Indian Writings and the Function of Art in the Shaping of Nationality,' *Japan Review*, 16 (2004), 129–59; and Shigemi Inaga, 'Tenshin Okakura Kakuzo and Sister Nivedita: On an Intellectual Exchange in Modernizing Asia,' *Beyond Borders: Japanese Studies in the 21st Century: In Memoriam Weslaw Kotanski*, Proceedings of International Conference, Warsaw, ed. Agnieszka Kozyra and Iwona Kordzinska-Nawrocka, (May 2006 (2007)), 90–5); and Rosenfield discusses briefly both individuals without a close reading of Okakura's text (see John Rosenfield, 'Okakura Kakuzo and Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita): A Brief Episode,' *Review of Japanese Culture and Society*, 24 (2012), 58–69). This paper argues for the triangular encounter between Vivekananda, Okakura, and Nivedita to understand the inspiration behind Okakura's 'The Awakening of the East' and his choice of ideas and language.
26. See Elleke Boehmer, *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction* (New York: Oxford University, 2005), 59.
  27. See Lizelle Reymond, *The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita* (Madras: Samata, 1985), 185–6.
  28. See *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 5 vols (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2010), 2.429–38.
  29. Kumari Jayawardena, 'Irish Rebellion and "Muscular Hinduism": Margaret Noble as Vivekananda's Lioness' in *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 191.
  30. 'The Awakening of the East', 1.151.
  31. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 2.37–8.
  32. *The Dedicated*, 51, 62, 78, 89.
  33. *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 1.101–3.
  34. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.482.
  35. Pravrajika Atmaprana, *Sister Nivedita* (Calcutta: Sister Nivedita Girls' School, 1999), 125–6; See also: *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction*, 90.
  36. *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920*, 91.
  37. *The Dedicated*, 260, 262, 267.
  38. *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.432; In her letter of 14 April 1903 to Josephine MacLeod, Nivedita wrote: 'The whole task now is to give the word 'Nationality' to India—in all its breadth and meaning. The rest will do itself. India must be observed by this great conception ... It means new views of history, of custom, and it means the assimilation of the whole Ramakr. [Ramakrishna]-Vivekananda idea in Religion—the synthesis of all religious ideas. It means a final understanding of the fact that the political process and the economic disaster are only side-issues, that the one essential fact is realisation of her own Nationality by the Nation' (*Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.553).
  39. *The Dedicated*, 263. Mother India is the nationalist personification of India that developed during the Indian independence movement of the late nineteenth century.
  40. *Sister Nivedita*, 126; See also *The Dedicated*, 234.
  41. British surveillance of Nivedita's actions and mail would begin after her 4 February 1902 speech 'India Has No Apology To Make' (*The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, 2.450–9) delivered in Madras and published in a Calcutta newspaper on 8 February. See *Sister Nivedita*, 133 and Nivedita, letter to Josephine MacLeod, 3 March 1902 in *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.458.
  42. Tagore, 'Some Reminiscences,' *Collected English Writings*, 3.234–5.
  43. *The Dedicated*, 260. Surendranath Tagore became involved in militant revolutionary activities towards Indian independence. See Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Calcutta, The Living City*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 1.65.
  44. Tagore, 'Some Reminiscences' in *Collected English Writings*, 3.237.
  45. Nivedita, letter to Josephine MacLeod, 14 August 1902 in *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 1.494.
  46. Nivedita, letter to Josephine MacLeod, 25 August 1903 in *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, 2.582.
  47. Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea* (London: G P Putnam, 1906), 10–1. Patrick Lafcadio Hearn wrote books about Japan.



# ***Sister Nivedita's Interactions with Devotees and Prominent Westerners***

**Gopal Stavig**



**M**ARGARET NOBLE, the future Sister Nivedita was born in Northern Ireland. As a young journalist and educationist, she first heard Swami Vivekananda speak at the residence of Lady Isabel Margesson on 10 November 1895 in London. Margesson's young son David (1890–1965) whom Swamiji blessed later became Winston Churchill's Secretary of State for War (1940–2). Her grandson Francis (Frank) Margesson sold Ridgely Manor in New York State in the late 1990s, to a

non-profit religious organisation affiliated with the Vedanta Society of Southern California.<sup>1</sup>

Nivedita later described the event this way: 'A majestic personage, clad in saffron gown and wearing a red-waist band, sat there on the floor, cross-legged. As he spoke to the company he recited Sanskrit verses in his deep, sonorous voice. His serene face, his dignified bearing and his divine voice cast a spell upon the listeners, who felt electrified by his frequent utterances of the name of "Shiva, Shiva!"' (259).

Thereafter she attended many of Swamiji's public lectures and talks in England during

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1895–6 and 1899. On 12 May 1896, Sister Nivedita urged her two friends in their mid-forties, Eric Hammond and his wife Nell Hammond, to attend one of Swamiji's classes in London. Eric worked as a journalist and poet in Wimbledon, England. The Hammonds became devoted admirers of Vivekananda, attending many of his discussions, including Abhedananda's first speech in the West in October 1896. Nell Hammond received ten letters from Nivedita during 1898–1902. Eric Hammond kept up his interest in Vedanta by publishing in the *Brahmavadin*, contributing over thirty articles in the *Prabuddha Bharata* and *Vedanta Kesari* between 1902 and 1938. In these articles he narrated stories about Swamiji and Nivedita, and composed poems and hymns. Concerning Sister Nivedita's attitude towards Swamiji, in 1927 Hammond recalled, 'Everywhere she went she hailed him as the Prophet of the age. ... she spoke of him and about him unceasingly. ... There is no one like him, no one to equal him, no one at all!'<sup>2</sup>

In a casual conversation Swamiji turned to her and said, 'I have plans for the women of my own country in which you, I think, could be of great help to me.'<sup>3</sup> She revealed, 'I knew that I had heard a call which would change my life, what these plans were, I did not know' (ibid.). Nivedita recorded some of Swamiji's teachings given in London during 1895–6, which appear in the first two chapters of her book, *The Master as I Saw Him*.<sup>4</sup>

Swamiji returned to India in January 1897. Nivedita remained active aiding Swami Abhedananda in his work in London. Learning of her sincerity, Swamiji sent eight encouraging letters to Nivedita in 1897 with inspiring statements like, 'Let me tell you frankly that I am now convinced that you have a great future in the work for India. What was wanted was not a

man, but a woman—a real lioness—to work for the Indians, women specially.'<sup>5</sup>

### **Sister Nivedita in India 1898–99**

After much deliberation, she sailed to India and arrived in Calcutta on 28 January 1898 with Swamiji waiting at the dock to receive her. On 17 March 1898, Sister Nivedita, Sara Bull—Dhira Mata, and Josephine MacLeod—Tantine—first met Holy Mother (1853–1920) in Calcutta, and they ate a meal together. Speaking in Bengali, Holy Mother greeted each of them affectionately as 'my daughter.' In a letter of 22 May 1898 to Mrs Nell Hammond in London, Nivedita described the meeting: 'She has always been terribly orthodox, but all this melted away the instant she saw the first two Westerns—Mrs. Bull and Miss MacLeod, and she tasted food with them! Fruit is always presented to us immediately, and this was naturally offered to her, and she to the surprise of everyone accepted. This gave us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could possibly have done.'<sup>6</sup> Nivedita maintained a life-long friendship with them, writing a large number of letters to Josephine and a fair number to Sara down to 1911.

Holy Mother wrote a letter to Nivedita dated 13 May 1900. It was in Bengali and translated into English by Swami Saradananda. The first paragraph read:

May this letter carry all blessings! My dear love to you, Baby Daughter Nivedita! I am so glad to learn that you have prayed to the Lord for my eternal peace. You are a manifestation of the ever-blissful Mother. I look at your photograph which is with me, every now and then. And it seems as if you are present with me. I long for the day and the year when you shall return. May the prayers you have uttered for me from the heart of your pure virgin soul be answered! I am well and happy. I always pray to the Lord to help you in your efforts, and keep you strong and

happy. I pray too for your quick return. May He fulfil your desires about the women's home in India, and may the would-be home fulfil its mission in teaching true *dharma* to all (L.412).

The former Margaret Noble received initiation into brahmacharya from Swamiji on 25 March 1898. She received the new name of Sister Nivedita, which means 'the dedicated one.'<sup>7</sup>

On 11 May, she was part of a party headed by Swamiji that travelled from Howrah station to Almora in Northern India. It included four Western women—Nivedita, Sara Bull, Josephine MacLeod, and Marion Patterson, the wife of the American Consul General appointed by US President William McKinley. The party left Almora for Kashmir on 11 June, returning to Calcutta on 11 October ending the five month long journey. Her book *Notes on Some Wanderings with the Swami Vivekananda* (1913) gives an insightful

account of the Swamis' conversations during that time. The fifth chapter in *The Master as I Saw Him* (1910) adds some descriptions of the trip.<sup>8</sup>

In the former book Nivedita mentions that Swamiji spoke of Genghis Khan (1142–1227), the conqueror of Central Asia. 'Yes, Napoleon [1769–1821] was cast in the same mould. And another Alexander [the Great, 356–23 BCE]. Only those three, or perhaps one soul manifesting itself in three different conquests!'<sup>9</sup> Here Swamiji does not state, but only suggests the possibility of reincarnation in the case of these three military leaders. Both Alexander and Napoleon desired to conquer India, invading from the West side. Alexander's armies proceeded East beyond the Indus into the Punjab, but then his war-weary army revolted when they approached the Ganges River and that brought an end to the venture. During Napoleon's 1798 campaign in Egypt, he

*Sister Nivedita's Cottage in Almora*





dreamt of an Indian conquest but things did not go well. In 1800, Napoleon signed a military and political alliance with the Russian Czar Paul I for the express purpose of conquering India with a joint army. The assassination of Paul in March 1801 brought an end to the venture.<sup>10</sup>

In the same book Nivedita points out that when Swamiji was returning to India in January 1897, he was fifty miles from the Island of Crete and had a dream. An old and bearded man told him that at one time there was a Buddhist mission there which had an influence on early Christianity. The old man mentioned the word *Therapeutae* as being derived from sons of the *Theras* or Buddhist monks. He also pointed to a specific place on the Island stating 'The proofs are all here. Dig, and you will find' (1.188). Excavations have been performed on the small Island of Thera—35 square miles—68 miles north of Crete, but nothing was identified as being Buddhistic. Crete is much larger at 3,219 square miles. A 3,500-year Minoan town was discovered in Eastern Crete, so a 2,000-year-old Buddhist mission is a possibility.

Nivedita became a great admirer of Holy Mother and some of her intimate disciples. On 13 November the auspicious day of the Kali Puja, the Mother performed the ceremony for the opening of Nivedita's new school in Calcutta and offered her blessings. In the future when Holy Mother came to Calcutta, she would visit Nivedita's school and she in return visited the Mother's house. Around that time, Sara Bull arranged to have three pictures taken of Holy Mother by the English photographer Harrington. She was reluctant, but Sara told her, 'I wish to take the photo to America and worship it.'<sup>11</sup> One of the photos was of Mother and Nivedita.

### ***Nivedita Returns to the West 1899–1901***

On 20 June 1899, she accompanied Swamis

Vivekananda and Turiyananda on a six-week voyage during his second visit to the West. When they stopped off at Colombo, Ceylon—Sri Lanka—they visited Marie Higgins' Buddhist Girls' School. Ms Higgins discussed with Nivedita about the possibility of her starting a Hindu girl's school in Colombo, which Nivedita seriously thought of establishing. In some significant ways she resembled Sister Nivedita. Marie Musaeus Higgins (Sudu Amma, 1855–1926), a German born Theosophist woman moved to the United States and then answered a magazine advertisement posted by Colonel Olcott (1832–1907). She became the Principle of the school that began with only twelve students from 1893 to 1926. By 1908, they were training teachers as headmistresses of Buddhist Sinhalese Girls' Schools. Higgins was held in high esteem due to her life-long devotion to the cause. She compiled books on Buddhism which were part of the curriculum. Musaeus College that bears her name is a private girls' school in Colombo, now with over 5,000 girls from ages three to eighteen managed by a Board of Trustees.<sup>12</sup>

They arrived in London on 31st July and Nivedita remained in England for over a month. She reached New York City on 17 September 1899 and Ridgely Manor three days later accompanied by Josephine MacLeod. In November, Sister Nivedita temporarily resided in Hull-House in Chicago, of which Jane Addams (1860–1935) and Ellen Gates Starr (1859–1940) were the co-founders. Vivekananda and Nivedita lectured at Addams residence in Chicago, and consequently his photograph is presently located on the wall of the Hull-House. In a letter Nivedita mentions her association with Miss Jane Addams, who, she states, 'is doing a great deal for me.'<sup>13</sup> In 1906, Nivedita sent a letter to Addams who in return mailed her response to Sara Bull. Concerning Miss Starr, Nivedita wrote to Mrs Belle Hale, 'I

love her so much. She is full of the true something, and a new face is often as stimulating to Swami as to others' (ibid.). Ellen Starr, a physically small and somewhat frail woman, possessed eloquent manners and speech. For two decades she received newspaper attention for vigorously supporting labor picket lines. Jane Addams was a remarkable woman to say the least, in 1931 the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, rated one of the top fifty sociologists of all time, a member of the illustrious National Women's Hall of Fame, and The Hall of Fame for Great Americans at New York University, a supporter of fellow peacemaker Mahatma Gandhi who praised each other's benevolent activities, a personal friend of Rabindranath Tagore, and an officer in the India Society of America.

In April 1900, Nivedita stayed with Lydia Coonley Ward (1845–1924) in Chicago for nearly a week. She wished to donate one hundred dollars to support Nivedita's school in India. Remembering her association with Swamiji seven years earlier, Mrs Ward described him as 'the most interesting human being she ever met.'<sup>14</sup> During her lifetime, Lydia Coonley Ward composed several popular and charming books of poetry, including a three-volume collection edition in 1921, and was President of the Chicago Women's Club (1895–6).<sup>15</sup>

Nivedita's school of thirty girls lacked a Permanent Fund or steady source of income. In order to procure funds for her proposed Widows' and Girls' Home and school in India, Nivedita formed The Ramakrishna Guild of Help in America. Mrs Betty Leggett was the President. Its officers included Sara Bull, Josephine MacLeod, Sister Christine, Lewis Janes, and Colonel Thomas Higginson, and others. In August 1894, Colonel Thomas Higginson (1823–1911) the President of the Free Religious Association invited Swamiji to speak before the group.

Among other things during the Civil War, Colonel Higginson commanded the First South Carolina Volunteers, the first regiment of former slaves organised by the Union Army. From his wartime experience, he wrote *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870), which is now a classic text in African-American history. Mrs Leggett donated a contribution a thousand dollars to get the project underway.<sup>16</sup>

On the 18 May Swamiji wrote to Nivedita, 'Enclosed find the letter of introduction to Mrs. Huntington. She can, if she likes, make your school a fact with one stroke of her pen. May Mother make her do it!'<sup>17</sup> Inspired by Swamiji, Arabella Huntington met Nivedita in New York City and presented her with a gift of five thousand dollars—equivalent to about \$145,000 in 2014—for her Girls' School in India. The immensely wealthy Arabella Huntington (1851–1924) of San Francisco was married to Collis Huntington (1821–1900) the President of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Her daughter-in-law Helen Huntington (d. 1950) later a Broadway playwright, greatly admired Swamiji and wrote two glaring tributes to him in the *Brahmavadin*—May, November 1896. Arabella aided her second husband Henry Huntington (1850–1927) in creating the renowned Huntington library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, which, upon his death he deeded to the State of California. It is now a public center that draws many visitors each day.<sup>18</sup>

On 6 July 1900, Swamiji's Will was witnessed in New York City. His estate was divided among five executors: Swamis Brahmananda and Saradananda, Margaret Noble—Sister Nivedita,—Sara Bull, and Francis Leggett. Due to legal complications the Will was not admitted for probate until early 1906. Sister Nivedita lived in Calcutta at that time and empowered Sara Bull to act on her behalf (524–5).

Nivedita listened to the Scottish sociologist, biologist, educator, and town-planner Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932) speak in New York in March 1900, and became interested in his unique ideas. She became his assistant in Paris, but the experiment did not work and she eventually quit. From mid-May to the end of June 1901 she lived with the Geddes family in Dundee, Scotland. At that time he invited her to speak at the Indian section of the Glasgow Exhibition. In November they met again and remained admirers and good friends throughout their life. From Geddes she learned some basic sociological concepts that Nivedita applied to her study of Indian society. In the introduction to her book *The Web of Indian Life* (1904) which she dedicated to Geddes, Nivedita acknowledged, 'In sending this book out into the world, I desire to record my thanks ... to Prof. Patrick Geddes, who by teaching me to understand a little of Europe, indirectly gave me a method by which to read my Indian experiences.' Geddes later wrote:

I found no one who so rapidly and ardently seized upon the principle and delighted in every application of it as Sister Nivedita. Eager to master these evolutionary methods, and to apply them to her own studies, to Indian problems therefore above all, she settled above our home into an attic cell, which suited at once her love of wide and lofty outlooks and her ascetic care of material simplicity; and there she worked, for strenuous weeks. ... For my part, I must no less recognize how her keener vision and more sympathetic and spiritual insight carried her discernment of the rich and varied embroidery of the Indian web far beyond that simple texture of the underlying canvas, of the material conditions of life, which it was my privilege at the outset of our many conversations to help her to lay hold upon.<sup>19</sup>

Swamiji and Geddes had formerly met in Chicago. They became well acquainted in

August 1900, and each morning Swamiji would walk and converse with Geddes on their way to the Paris Exposition. In September, they came together again at a party thrown by the Leggett's in Paris. According to Geddes' biographer Philip Boardman, as a result of his encounter with Swamiji, 'The eastern discipline of body and mind made such a lasting impression on both Anna [Geddes' wife] and Patrick that they later handed on to their young children the simple Raja Yoga exercises for control of the inner nature.' These experiences deepened Geddes' interest in the land and soul of India. Among other things, Geddes wrote a Preface to the French translation of Swamiji's *Raja Yoga* in 1910. In 1914, he undertook a diagnosis-and-treatment survey of fifty Indian urban areas. He concluded that the traditional strategy of British planners in slum clearance disrupted community neighborhood life and destroyed indigenous customs. The May 1917 issue of the *Prabuddha Bharata* praised Geddes' efforts stating, 'He has distinguished himself not only by his expert knowledge in town-planning, but also by his profound learning in all subjects connected with the betterment of human life on earth, and his selfless devotion to that cause.'<sup>20</sup> He was the first Professor of Sociology and Civics at the University of Bombay (1919–24). In cooperation with his friend Rabindranath Tagore, he worked on plans for an international university in India. Geddes authored *The Life and Work of Sir Jagadis C. Bose* (1920), the famous physicist, and also made contact with Mahatma Gandhi and Annie Besant.

Swamiji left for Paris in August 1900, where he spoke at the Paris Congress of the History of Religions. He was introduced to the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), as was Sister Nivedita. She held long discussions with him at that time and again in London in 1908. Nivedita liked his emphasis on peaceful methods to bring



about political-social change and opposition to centralised government. After escaping from Russia for his opposition to the czarist government, Kropotkin was expelled from Switzerland, jailed in France, and finally settled in England in 1886.<sup>21</sup>

Jamsetji Tata (1839–1904) offered a gift of 200,000 pound sterling to promote higher education in India desiring to obtain advice on the subject from learned people. So Nivedita mailed out a 'statement of opinion' that she wanted to be signed, stating among other things that the project would be 'guided by the best educated Natives as distinguished from European opinion.'<sup>22</sup> One respondent was the famous Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910). He signed her statement and on 3 January 1901, dispatched a letter to Nivedita, as Miss Noble, stating on this issue he favored Native education over the Anglo-Saxon. He also referred to her and Mrs Bull, implying that he was with them in Paris back in August 1900. In 1901, Nivedita and Sara Bull again met William James, this time on a train from London to Edinburgh. In a letter of 15 May, James described Sister Nivedita as possessing 'an extraordinary fine character and mind,' to be 'a most deliberate and balanced person,' 'who has Hinduized herself (converted by Vivekananda to his philosophy) and lives now for the Hindu people.'<sup>23</sup>

### ***Nivedita in India 1902–07***

Accompanied by Sara Bull and R C Dutt, Nivedita reached Madras on 3 February 1902. There attending a public celebration before a large audience she gave a forceful speech advocating that in social matters Indians should decide what kind of society they desire and not be under foreign domination, while praising the lofty character of Indian women. In order to properly instruct her students at Nivedita Girls' School, she learned the Bengali language. German born

Miss Christine Greenstidel—Sister Christine, 1866–1930—arrived from the United States to be a manager and teacher at the school, allowing Nivedita more opportunity to write and lecture.<sup>24</sup> Nivedita wrote, 'It was to Sister Christine and her faithfulness and initiative alone that the school owes its success to the present.'<sup>25</sup>

Sister Nivedita wrote a very friendly letter to Spence Burton (1881–1966) who was about to become an Anglican monastic member of the Society of St John the Evangelist. She invited him to India and addressed him as 'your faithful friend.' He later became the first American to be

*Miss Christine Greenstidel, Sister Christine (1866–1930)*



consecrated a Bishop in the Church of England at Haiti and the Dominican Republic (1939–42) and then at Nassau (1942–62).<sup>26</sup>

In 1902, Nivedita first visited the Government School of Art, Calcutta, a group of Indian pupils under the direction of the British Principal Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934) from 1896 to 1905. They met again in England after she returned in 1907. The two held long discussions and she explained to Havell the basic principles of Indian ascetics and philosophy of art. Their goal along with Abanindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy was to revitalize Indian art rather than copy Western methods, which later led to the foundation of the Bengal School of Art. Havell sought to propagate a truer picture in the West of Indian cultural heritage and to discourage young Indians from appreciating the immoral and uninspiring aspects of Western art. Havell authored thirteen books on Indian art and history. Nivedita became the art critic for the Calcutta based *Modern Review* from its beginning in 1907. In time, Sister Nivedita was introduced by the artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) to Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936) at a party of the Art Society held at Justice Homewood's house. Woodroffe gave full support to Abanindranath's School of Art.<sup>27</sup> Woodroffe authored forty-five articles in the *Prabuddha Bharata* and *Vedanta Kesari* (1915–29), was the President of the Vivekananda Society of Calcutta (1917–18), initiated by Shivkali Bhattacharya, was the leading Western authority on Tantra and Kundalini yoga—sometimes writing under the pseudonym Arthur Avalon—served as the Chief Justice of Bengal's High Court (after 1915), and a Reader in Indian law at Oxford University (1923–30).<sup>28</sup>

During the 1902–07 period, Samuel Kerkham Ratcliffe (1868–1958), a journalist and lecturer, was the assistant and then the acting editor of

the *Statesman*, the foremost English newspaper in Calcutta. He edited the *Sociological Review* during the period 1910–17, and, in 1915, received appointment to be a Lecturer at the South Place Ethical Society in London, later writing a history of that organization. A prolific lecturer in India and England, he favored the cause of Indian self-government. When he lived in Calcutta, Ratcliffe held great admiration for the work Sister Nivedita was doing, and they met again in England. From her he gained a far better understanding of the Indian culture and psyche. Nivedita wrote a number of letters to him and his wife from 25 September 1902 down to the time of her passing. In the *Sociological Review* of 1913, he composed a two-page tribute of Swami Vivekananda (553–4).

Ratcliffe wrote a twenty-four page 'In Memoriam' concerning Nivedita found in the Preface of *Studies From an Eastern Home* (1913) where he stated in part:

She was then entirely accepted by her Hindu neighbours. All their doors were open to her. In the bazaars and lanes and by the riverside everybody knew her, and she would be saluted as she passed with an affectionate reverence which was beautiful and touching to see. ... Her house was a wonderful rendezvous. Not often did one meet a Western visitor, save at those times when an English or American friend would be making a stay in Calcutta; but nowhere else, so far as my experience went, was there an opportunity of making acquaintance with so many interesting types of the Indian world. There would come members of Council and leaders in the public affairs of Bengal; Indian artists, men of letters, men of science; orators, teachers, journalists, students; frequently a travelled member of the Order of Ramakrishna, occasionally a wandering scholar, not seldom a public man or leader of religion from a far province. The experience was beyond expression delightful, and its influence, you knew, was to be felt along many lines. ...

I heard her speak: to groups of students, or in the Calcutta Town Hall before a great audience, on her one absorbing theme—the religion of Nationalism; to English gatherings in hall or church or drawing-room. And I have thought, and still think, that her gift of speech was something which, when fully exercised, I have never known surpassed—so fine and sure was it in form, so deeply impassioned, of such flashing and undaunted sincerity. ... Her dominant notes were clarity and sincerity and an incomparable vitality. She was, of all the men and women one has known, the most vividly alive. ... At all times she toiled with an absolute concentration; her inner life was intense, austere, and deeply controlled. Yet never was anyone more wholly and exquisitely human, more lovely and spontaneous in the sharing of daily services and joys. ...

And those to whom she gave the ennobling gift of her friendship knew her as the most perfect of comrades, while they hold the memory of that gift as this world's highest benediction. They think of her years of sustained and intense endeavour, of her open-eyed and impassioned search for truth, of the courage that never quailed, the noble compassionate heart; they think of her tending the victims of famine and plague, or ministering day by day among the humble folk with whom her lot was cast: putting heart into the helpless and defeated, showing to the young and perplexed the star of a glowing faith and purpose, royally spending all the powers of a rich intelligence and an overflowing humanity for all who called upon her in their need. And some among them count it an honour beyond all price that they were permitted to share, in however imperfect a measure, the mind and confidence of this radiant child of God.<sup>29</sup>

Scottish born Andrew James Fraser Blair (1872–1935) is listed as the editor of the *Englishman* newspaper (1898–1906), then the editor and managing director of *The Empire Commerce* and *The Empire Gazette*, and then the assistant

editor of the *Statesman*, all published in Calcutta. As a book writer he authored three novels under the pen name Hamish Blair. He first came face to face with Nivedita on Christmas day 1902 in Calcutta as a guest of Mr and Mrs Ratcliffe. A couple of years later he heard her lecture at the Town Hall of Calcutta. After her passing Blair described Nivedita in the *Empire*:

A vehement champion of the East in all its aspects against the West ... a tall, robust woman in the very prime of life. Her face in repose was almost plain. The cheek bones were high and the jaws were square. The face at the first glance expressed energy and determination, but you would hardly have looked at it again but for the forehead and the eyes. The eyes were a calm, deep blue, and literally lit up the whole countenance. The forehead was broad rather than high, and was surmounted by a semi-Indian Sari, fastened to the abundant brown hair. In animation the face and its expression were transfigured, in sympathy with the rich, musical voice. ... To be admitted to her friendship was to establish a claim upon an inexhaustible gold mine. She gave herself without reserve. She lived for her friends and her work. For them she would pour out all her wondrous eloquence, and her vast and curious knowledge, she would travel any distance and would incur any labour and anxiety. Whatever she did, she did with all her might, and she never did anything for herself. ... No kinder-hearted woman ever breathed. Her influence over Young Bengal was greater than most people have ever suspected. ... To those who loved her it is difficult to realise that this vivid, brave, and gifted personality has vanished from our sphere.<sup>30</sup>

At the Sister Nivedita Memorial Meeting at Calcutta on 23 March 1912, Blair added:

We are gathered to do honour to the memory of one of the noblest women God ever made—a woman who gave up a most precious life in India and for India—a woman who by her record of courage, self-sacrifice and love, no less



than by her radiant personality and her intellectual power, broke down for us the barriers of time and space, and took us back to the spacious days of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. ... Her great book *The Web of Indian Life* represents the highest point yet reached by any Western writer in the study and interpretation of the East. If there were time one might go on for hours expatiating upon the wondrous diversity of her gifts—her eloquence, the acuteness of her perceptions, the firmness of her intellectual grasp, the dazzling purity of her mind, the whole-souled devotion which she was ever ready to pour out upon the cause and the friends she had made her own.<sup>31</sup>

Nivedita contributed to the London based *Review of Reviews* founded and edited by William T Stead. He became a personal friend and invited her to become his Indian correspondent in London. Because of her commitment to India she could not accept his offer. He sent a letter to her on 1st January 1903 and she to him on 20 September 1904. William T Stead (1849–1912) who died on the Titanic was one of the most influential journalists of his day. He supported world peace, child welfare, social reform legislation, and was an ardent spiritualist.<sup>32</sup>

As a patriot Nivedita actively supported the Indian nationalist movement in many ways, such as going on a lecture tour throughout India to rouse the national consciousness of the people. She established friendship with Indian political and social leaders like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, G K Gokhale, and others; and through her writings she authored a number of books that are still well read.<sup>33</sup> While in India she made some contact with prominent Westerners including Annie Besant around the beginning of 1906. She held a cordial relationship with Annie Besant greatly approving of her support for the Indian political and social cause, but had little if

any interest in Theosophy.<sup>34</sup> In an 11 April 1906 letter to Josephine MacLeod, Nivedita made her famous prophecy, 'You see, when we who understood Swamiji and remembered him are dead, there will come a long period of obscurity and silence, for the work that He did. It will *seem* to be forgotten, until, suddenly, in 150 or 200 years, it will be found to have transformed the West.'<sup>35</sup>

During the winter of 1907, Swami Abhedananda sent a letter to William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) mentioning among other things, 'Our friend Sister Nivedita spoke to me about your visit to her girls' school in Calcutta.'<sup>36</sup> She had 'a particularly joyous breakfast' with Bryan and his wife at the Bagh Bazaar. Bryan a three-time United States Presidential candidate and Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson, in 1899 wrote an article criticizing 'British Rule in India.' In 1906, he decided to go to India and check things out for himself. At Allahabad he made an earnest appeal for free education for all classes of Indians. Upon his return to the United States, Bryan published the pamphlet 'British Rule in India' (1906) favoring Indian independence (ibid.).

### **Back to the West 1907–09**

On 6 September 1907, Nivedita returned to England where she would meet with her old friends, and make new contacts among the intellectual class. The English cleric, Thomas Kelly Cheyne (1841–1915) was the Oriel Professor of the Interpretation of Christian Scripture at Oxford University between 1885 and 1908. Being the initiator of the 'higher criticism' of the *Bible* theological movement in England, he published over twenty books dealing with his interpretation of the *Biblical Old Testament*. T K Cheyne and J Sutherland Black edited the esteemed four volume, 2800-plus-page *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (1899–1903). Sister Nivedita sent twenty-two letters to her good friend T K Cheyne, from 25

November 1907 up until the time of her passing away in 1911. During her visit to England in 1908 and in 1911, she conversed with Cheyne and her other friends. He later wrote of her, 'The beautiful character of Sister Nivedita is well known to her friends, but needs to be brought before outsiders, especially those of the younger generation. She was like a star, if we should not rather say, like a sun, and it would be sad if this sun should altogether set.' In January 1911, in the *Hibbert Journal*, T K Cheyne came out with a review of Nivedita's work on Vivekananda, *The Master as I Saw Him* (1910). This article might have been the first attempt by a Western scholar to interpret and explain the teachings of Vivekananda.<sup>37</sup>

In the *Modern Review*, Calcutta (February 1912) T. K. Cheyne disclosed:

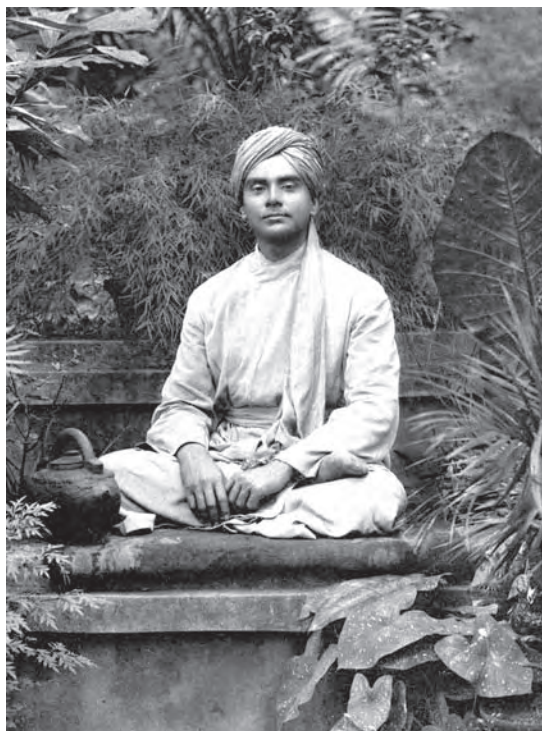
It was *The Web of Indian Life* which brought us spiritually together. The book fascinated me. I had never before seen India described from the inside. I wrote to her as warmly as I felt, at the same time drawing her attention to the criticisms which some dryasdust professor had brought against her views of history. She replied in glowing terms, at the same time answering my inquiry as to the best sources of information for Hindu religion in its noblest form. She pointed me to the *Bhagavad Gita* and the lectures of the Swami Vivekananda. This produced a revolution in my view of the capacity of Hindu religion for adapting itself progressively to the spiritual needs of Indians, and for contributing elements of enormous value to the purification, enrichment, and reinterpretation of Christianity ... Sister Nivedita was well aware that I looked for help to the Aryan East, and especially to her and her Master, and this may have been the chief reason why she paid me in the dazzling coin of affection, reverence, and gratitude for the sympathy which I delighted to express to her.<sup>38</sup>

During this time Nivedita made the acquaintance of Sir Henry John Stedman Cotton (1845–1915), who had been the Chief Commissioner

of Assam (1896–1902) and a friend of Vivekananda. He served as President of the Indian National Congress (1904) since he favoured Indian Home Rule, and later was a Liberal party member of the British Parliament (1906–10).<sup>39</sup> Her friends in England also included: V H Rutherford later the author of *Commonwealth or Empire?* (1917) and *Modern India* (1927); Kier Hardie (1856–1915) a Scottish socialist, the first Labour member of the British Parliament, and a campaigner for Self-Rule for India; Swift MacNeill (1849–1926), an Irish Protestant Nationalist who served in the House of Commons (1887–1918) and a Professor of Constitutional and Criminal Law at the King's Inns, Dublin, Ireland; and a young William Redmond (1886–1932) an Irish nationalist politician who was a member of the House of Commons.<sup>40</sup>

Nivedita also conversed with an old friend Henry Nevinson (1856–1941). In the 1880s,

Swami Abhedananda (1866–1939)



Nevinson became a socialist and befriended Peter Kropotkin and Edward Carpenter. He was a British newspaper war correspondent during the Greco-Turkish War (1897), Spanish-American War (1898), Second Boer War (1899–1902), Russian revolution (1905), and World War I being wounded at Gallipoli. A campaigning journalist and political commentator he uncovered and exposed the practice of extremely harsh slavery by Europeans in Angola, West Africa (1904–05). He was a cofounder of the Men's League for Women's Suffrage (1907). During 1907 Nevinson spent four months traveling throughout India to 'discover the causes of the present discontent and to report, without prejudice, the opinion of leading Indians as well as officials' following the Partition of Bengal in 1905. He was impressed by Tilak, Gokhale, and R Tagore; and described Sri Aurobindo in glowing terms.<sup>41</sup>

Thomas Kelly Cheyne (1841–1915)



Henry Nevinson wrote of Nivedita:

There was, indeed, something flame-like about her, and not only her language but her whole vital personality often reminded me of fire. ... But of all nobly sympathetic natures she was among the finest. She identified herself with the Indians among whom she lived as barely half a dozen men or women from these islands have done before. I do not mean merely by her adoption of Hindu symbolism for thought, nor by her purified form of Hindu worship. ... But her readiness to accept and interpret what was clearest and highest in Hindu thought, her capacity not merely for understanding Indian life, but for discovering and so intensifying the ideal in its customs, and the indignant revolt kindled in her by the insolence, degradation, and maiming restriction to which every subject race is necessarily exposed—from such imaginative sympathy, I think, arose the extraordinary power which she exercised over the more thoughtful and active of the Indian patriots around her. ... Her greatest book, *The Web of Indian Life*, reveals the ideal of the Indian spirit with great beauty, and in it there is a passage which seems to illustrate the contrast between the ordinary Anglo-Indian woman's aspect of India and her own.<sup>42</sup>

Sister Nivedita decided to return to the US arriving in Boston on 5 October 1908. She took up residence with Sara Bull and met old acquaintances like Sarah Farmer, Emma Thursby, and Madam Calve. That year Frank J Alexander (d. 1917) had an interview with Sister Nivedita in 1908, at Grand Central Station in New York City. They conversed for about three quarters of an hour and Frank's reaction was: 'During my journalistic experience of five or six years, during which time I have interviewed all types of people from United States Senators to interesting hod-carriers and from famous artists to turbulent leaders of labour, I have never met a personality which impressed me in less than an hour's time with being possessed of such a synthetic mind



and cyclonic personal energy.<sup>43</sup> Inspired by the writing of Vivekananda, Alexander set sail for India and arrived at the Belur Math in 1911.<sup>44</sup> He offered an invaluable service in bringing out the four-volume, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda by His Eastern and Western Disciples* (1912–18), but since it was a joint venture the extent of his contribution is not known. Later editions of this work proved to be an invaluable source for Marie Louise Burke and others as a foundation for their historical research. In addition, between 1911 and 1913, Frank authored at least twenty-seven articles for the *Prabuddha Bharata*.

Reverend Jabez Sunderland (1842–1936) became acquainted with Sister Nivedita during her visit to the United States. He came to India in 1895–96 and again in 1913–14, being the first American to speak at a meeting of the Indian National Congress in Poona. For decades Sunderland was the leading American spokesman supporting the freedom of India. His 529-page *India in Bondage, Her Right to Freedom and a Place among Nations* (1928), was referred to by the patriots as the ‘Bible of Indian Struggle for Freedom.’<sup>45</sup>

Nivedita left America for England in January 1909 to be with her mother during her last days.

### **Nivedita's Final Two Years 1909–11**

Nivedita returned to India reaching Bombay on 16 July 1909. Henry Nevinston presented Ramsay MacDonald (1866–1937) with a letter of introduction for Nivedita when he came to Calcutta in November 1909. After meeting her on more than one occasion, he was impressed with her intelligence and personality when she explained to him about Indian ideals and philosophy.<sup>46</sup> At a later date MacDonald was Great Britain's first Labor Party Prime Minister (1929–35).

Lady Minto was the wife of the Earl of Minto (1845–1914), the Viceroy and Governor-General

of India (1905–10). On 2 March 1910, the day before Lady Minto held a discussion with Swami Shivananda at the Belur Math, she paid a visit to Sister Nivedita and her girls' school. Lady Minto commented, ‘I told her I was the Viceroy's wife, which surprised her greatly. She has a charming face, with a very intelligent expression, and we made friends.’<sup>47</sup> A few days later, at Nivedita's request, Lady Minto accompanied her to the Dakshineswar Temple, where Sri Ramakrishna had lived for many years. She toured the grounds and was taken to the Master's bedroom. Before leaving Lady Minto advised Nivedita to continue writing, and invited her to tea privately at the Government House on 18 March. The following year after Nivedita's sudden passing away, Lady Minto wrote a letter of consolation to Sister Christine, saying:

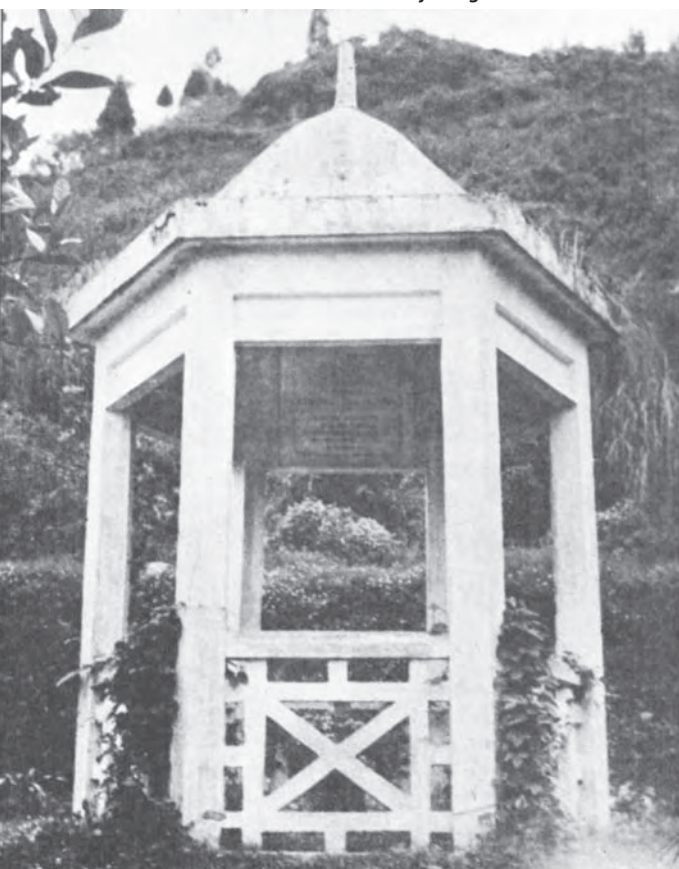
It is with very real regret that I read in the newspapers of the sad loss that has been sustained in the death of Sister Nivedita. I cannot resist sending you a few lines of very deep sympathy, and not only for yourself but for all the Indian community for whom she was working. Sister Nivedita had a wonderful personality, and as I look back to the few meetings I had with her with pleasure, and with real admiration for her enthusiasm and single-minded desire to assist others. The world is the poorer for her loss, and for you her constant companion and helper the blank she leaves must be irreparable.<sup>48</sup>

Sara Bull's health was failing and she requested Nivedita to be at her bedside. So Nivedita returned to America reaching Cambridge in Boston on 15 November 1910. Sara passed away on 18 January 1911 and in her will she bequeath thirty-thousand dollars, equivalent to \$770,000 in 2015, to Sister Nivedita.<sup>49</sup>

The daughter of the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–82), Miss Alice Mary Longfellow (1850–1928) corresponded with Nivedita. They first met in 1900

at the Free Religious Association meetings in Boston where Nivedita delivered a lecture. After Sara Bull's passing in January 1911, Nivedita went to stay with Alice Longfellow in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When Nivedita passed away, she contributed a eulogy to the *Boston Evening Transcript* of 29 June 1911 praising her. She wrote in part: 'Her bright, intelligent face, her earnest manner and attractive personality, enhanced by the simple white habit of her order, made a strong impression on the audience.'<sup>50</sup> In a 1911 letter written to Josephine MacLeod, Miss Longfellow indicated, 'I love to think of Margot's [Nivedita's] alert, alive face, and the way she grappled with conversation. It made all the rest of us seem only half alive—and now she must be more

Sister Nivedita's Samadhi at Darjeeling



alive than then' (2.1254). Alice was one of the founders of Radcliffe College, where on May 8, 1894 Vivekananda spoke on 'Hinduism.' At Radcliffe, she held the position of manager, treasurer, and a member of the Executive Committee.<sup>51</sup>

On 7 April 1911, Nivedita was back in India and soon spoke to Holy Mother. In the fall, Nivedita had an attack of blood dysentery and passed away on 13th October. At the end, Nivedita chanted from the *Upanishads*, 'Lead us from the unreal to the Real. Lead us from darkness to light. Lead us from death to Immortality,' and breathed her last.<sup>52</sup>

Nivedita's funeral procession was the largest that Darjeeling ever witnessed. Her cremation ceremony was attended by an Anglo-Indian lady, Miss Mary Henrietta Pigot (b. 1837). She had previously witnessed Sri Ramakrishna in samadhi, while on a steam launch up the river to Dakshineswar on 23 February 1882. In 1870, Miss Pigot became the lady Superintendent of the Female Mission of the Scottish Ladies' Association in Calcutta. It was under the control of the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, with headquarters in Edinburgh. After 1884, she was the headmistress of Victoria College, a girls' school.<sup>53</sup>

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## ***Sister Nivedita: The 'Dedicated' Daughter of Mother India***

**Sadhu Prof. V Rangarajan**

**W**ITH THESE STIRRING WORDS the mighty colossus, Swami Vivekananda, sped his powerful shaft, Sister Nivedita, into the battlefield of India's freedom struggle:

When a great man has prepared his workers, he must go to another place, for he cannot make them free in his own presence. I am nothing more for you. I have handed over to you the

power that I possessed; now I am only a wandering monk. There is a peculiar sect of Mohammedans who are reported to be so fanatical that they take every newborn babe and expose it, saying, 'If God made thee, perish. If Ali made thee, live.' Now what they say to the child I say, but in the opposite sense, to you tonight: 'Go forth into the world, and there, if I made you, be destroyed. If the Divine Mother made you, live.'<sup>1</sup>

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'The freedom that he wanted her to fight for was not merely the political emancipation of Mother India from alien rule, but also the freedom from the dark clouds of ignorance that had

engulfed Her for more than thousand years making Her self-forgetful of Her own ancient and pristine glory.<sup>2</sup>

Dr Bhupendranath Datta, the illustrious younger brother of Swamiji and revolutionary, has rightly pointed out in his inspiring work, *Swami Vivekananda—Patriot-Prophet* that the primary object of Swami Vivekananda was nationalism. Nivedita has said that Swamiji advised her to dedicate her life for the service of the Mother. 'The *Vajrayudha*, the mighty thunderbolt that Swami Vivekananda moulded for accomplishing this task was Sister Nivedita.'<sup>3</sup>

### **Birth in Ireland and Dedication to Mother India**

Margaret Noble was born on October 28, 1867, at Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, in far-off Ireland, in a family of revolutionaries. Her grandfather, John Noble, father, Samuel Richmond and her maternal grandfather, Hamilton, were in the forefront of Irish freedom struggle.

Completing her college education in Halifax, Margaret took to teaching for ten years from 1884 to 1894. During the later part of this period she came into contact with the famous revolutionary, Prince Kropotkin.

When Swami Vivekananda visited England, after establishing his reputation in the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, conquered by his magnetic personality, convinced by the depth of his wisdom and realization and carried away by his ideals of sacrifice and service, Margaret dedicated herself at the feet of great sannyasin and came to India in on March 25, 1898, she was initiated into the order of brahmacharya by Swamiji who conferred on her the new name 'Nivedita' meaning the 'Dedicated'.

During the period May to October 1898, Sister Nivedita went on a tour of Almora and Kashmir regions, accompanying Swami Vivekananda. In Kashmir, she observed how the British government refused permission to the

Maharaja of Kashmir to hand over a piece of land to her guru to set up a Mutt and Sanskrit College. Her Irish blood revolted and she realized that the emancipation of India and regeneration of Hinduism could be achieved only by putting an end to British rule in India.<sup>4</sup>

### **Service During Plague**

On return to Calcutta, Sister Nivedita stayed for a week with the Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi and later shifted to the house in 16, Bosepara lane, where the Mother performed the opening ceremony of Nivedita's school for girls on November 13, 1898. In March 1899, when plague raged in Calcutta, Sister Nivedita organized a group of young men and engaged herself in relief operations. She was seen in every slum in the Baag Bazaar area with a broom stick in her hand, cleaning the streets when no sweepers and scavengers are available. She even sacrificed her regular diet of milk to meet the expenses of patient (ibid.).

Kali Charan Ghosh, in his inspiring book, *The Role Of Honour*, narrates Nivedita's meeting with the mother of Chapekar brothers, the martyrs and heroes of freedom struggle. He says,

The Poona plague started dismally and ended disastrously involving the lives of a number of persons, some of whom have brought glory to the nation, struggling for settling accounts with the foreigners wherever possible.

The spirit of sacrifice for a cause that was displayed by Damodar and his brothers can be traced back to the great mother who could offer three sons at the altar of the Motherland in the course of not as many months.

Sister Nivedita came to know about the momentous event and thought of paying her respects in person to the mother leading a life of devotion and retirement at Poona. The revered lady was engaged in her daily *puja* when the Sister reached the Chapekar home. She was astounded to find the mother completely composed; no complaints, no regrets. There was no necessity of giving expression to sentiments of

sympathy and solace to one who needed none. Nivedita with devotional awe bowed down to touch the feet of the mother of the heroes. She came away with a sense of deeper philosophy in an Indian mother's life. The spirit of self-respect and march towards self-realization of the Indian nation was well on its way and Nivedita came to realise that it had proceeded far ahead of the stage of which she had any idea.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Under the Shadow of British Police***

In the middle of June 1899, Nivedita left for England with Swamiji. Later she proceeded to America on a lecture tour with a view to raise funds for her school. During her visit to Boston, she met the great Indian patriot, Bipin Chandra Pal. In America, she gave up her western dress and took to simple and graceful gown of white flannel with a girdle fastened to the waist. From America she went to Paris. When Nivedita returned to England, she had to face the vile propaganda of British imperialists and Christian missionaries against her, but this only kindled the revolutionary spirit in her.

In 1902, when she returned to India, she experienced the joy of returning to her own motherland and at a reception accorded to her at Madras, she proclaimed to the Indians at the top of her voice: 'Just as it has been realised already that in religion you have a great deal to give, and nothing to learn from the West, so also in social matters it will be well to understand that what changes are necessary you are fully competent to make yourselves, and no outsider has the right to advise or interfere.'<sup>6</sup> Her speech won her the admiration and blessings of her Master, but aroused the anger of the British Government who black-listed her name, deputed CID officials to shadow her and censored her letters.

### ***'Bande Mataram' in School Prayer***

The Nivedita Girl's school in Calcutta was a

brilliant example to nationalist institutions all over the country. Nivedita not only refused to take the aid of the government, but even introduced *Bande Mataram* in the dailies of her school, at a time when singing the song in public was an offence. She also introduced swadeshi and spinning wheel in her school. Besides being a school, her place of residence was also a meeting place of scientists, artists, journalists, nationalists, and revolutionaries. Young men inspired by Nivedita used to attend the Sunday get-togethers at her home and prominent among them was Barindra Ghosh, the renowned revolutionary and younger brother of Aurobindo.

### ***Intense Spirit of Patriotism***

One day Nivedita asked her students: 'Who is the queen of India?' The girls replied: 'Her Majesty the Queen Victoria.' It naturally occurred to them that in the England-ruled India, their queen was Queen Victoria. Nivedita was visibly upset to hear this reply. She was both angry and grieved. She cried out: 'You don't even appear to know who the queen of India is. Your queen is Queen Sita. Sita is the eternal queen of India.'<sup>7</sup>

Nivedita tried to imprint nationalist ideas in the minds of her girl students through all their activities and behaviour including language, dress, education, music, and everything. ... Any national object, no matter how insignificant it might be, was dear to her like a worshipped deity. She tried to infuse this reverence into her students also so that they could view any national object in such depth.<sup>8</sup>

Nivedita had introduced the teaching of patriotism and hero worship by prayer and the recitation of the mantra, 'Bharatvarsha,'—Mother India—at every free moment. She trained the children in silence and concentration upon the meaning of these words; then she would tell them stories of Bengali, Maharashtra, and Rajput heroines facing death with honour, of Ramanuja in the South and Guru Nanak in the North in their



mission of fraternity through devotion. When the children went back to their homes, they had offered their very life to the Indian nation.<sup>9</sup>

For the Swadeshi exhibitions, of 1904 and 1905, the pupils wove silks to serve as models for the weavers, and embroidered a national flag. She exhorted:

We must surround our children with the thought of their nation and their country. The centre of gravity must lie, for them, outside the family. We must demand from them sacrifices for India, Bhakti for India, learning for India. The ideal for its own sake. India for the sake of India. This must be as the breath of life to them. We must teach them about India, in school and at home. ... Burning love, love without a limit. Love that seeks only the good of the beloved, and has no thought of self, this is the passion that we must demand of them.<sup>10</sup>

### ***As Leader of Revolutionaries***

'If our Sister fell under the spell of India, we in our turn fell under her spell, and her bewitching personality attracted thousands of our young men to her. If the dry bones are beginning to stir, it is because Sister Nivedita breathed the breath of life into them' (1.x-xi), 'said the great revolutionary, Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh, about Sister Nivedita's role in the revolutionary movement in India's freedom struggle. She took her part boldly in India's struggle to find its soul, and she gave all she had without wondering what would become of her.'<sup>11</sup>

Some leading members of the society felt the need of mobilising the energies of the young men for national work and their public activities took a new direction. Under their guidance numerous associations and groups such as 'The Young Men's Hindu Union Committee', 'The Gita Society', 'The Dawn Society', 'The Anusilan Samity' and 'The Vivekananda Society' were formed. Nivedita who had faith in the social and spiritual renaissance of the Indian people, readily associated herself with these societies.

Whenever she was invited, she went and talked on Hinduism and read and explained the Gita or Swami Vivekananda's works. Her talks were inspiring. She had so long thought about the problems of India that now her ideas became a living power which opened out new horizons for the young. She used and repeated the words 'nation' and 'nationality' as a Mantra; it was she who coined the word 'national-consciousness'. She encouraged them to arrange for sports and recitation and lecture competitions and on special occasions awarded Vivekananda Medals for merit. The young men always clustered round her for inspiration and guidance. She was a 'Guru' to them. Gymnasiums were conducted by these societies for giving physical training to the young; study circles were organized where the lives and teachings of great men were read and histories of the struggle for freedom of the different countries, politics, and economics were studied. Classes on moral instructions were held on Sundays where the national epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Gita, the Chandi and the Swami's works were expounded. Sri Aurobindo knew about the existence of the societies and planned to organize them into one party. To quote his words: 'I found a number of small groups of revolutionaries that had recently sprung into existence, but all scattered and acting without reference to each other. I tried to unite them under a single organisation with the barrister P. Mitra as the leader of the revolution in Bengal and a Central Council of five persons, one of them being Nivedita' (12).

In 1902, when Viceroy Lord Curzon appointed the 'University Commission', to strangle the national education system, Nivedita came to the forefront in condemning the move. She came into close contact with the fiery freedom fighter, Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya. After Aurobindo's reaching Bengal, when he organized a five member revolutionary committee consisting of himself, Surendranath Tagore, C.R. Das, Yateendra Bannerji and Sister Nivedita, Nivedita acted as the Secretary of the

committee and undertook the task of organising under one banner various revolutionary organisations operating in Bengal. Later this revolutionary committee was merged into the Anushilan Samiti, the secret revolutionary society, and Sister Nivedita became a source of inspiration and guidance to the young revolutionaries participating in the underground activities of the Samiti.

In March 1905, Nivedita fell seriously ill and spent some time in Darjeeling with the family of Jagdish Chandra Bose. But the explosive atmosphere aroused in the country in the wake of the British Government's decision to partition Bengal, made her return to Calcutta in the first week of July 1905. She addressed mammoth public meetings. In one such meeting, she spoke strongly supporting the resolution moved by the famous revolutionary, Anand Mohan Bose, condemning the unwise move of the British Government (17).

**Bust of Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Installed in the Garden of Birla Industrial and Technological Museum, Kolkata**



## Guru of Mahakavi Bharati

Mahakavi C Subramania Bharati, the poet-patriot of Tamilnadu,

while returning from the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress in 1906, met Sister Nivedita at Dum Dum and recognized in her his spiritual mother. That he accepted her as his Guru and received initiation into Shakti worship is expressed with intense devotion and gratitude by him in a couple of dedications of his poems. Dedicating his work, *Swadesha Geetangal*, to Nivedita, he says: 'I dedicate this small work at the feet of my guru, who showed me the perfect form of Bharata Devi and thought me *Swadesha bhakti* just as Sri Krishna showed to Arjuna. His Vishwaroopa and expounded to him the truth of the self.' Dedicating *janma bhoomi* (*Swadesha Geetangal*) to Nivedita he says 'I dedicate this work to Shree Nivedita Devi, the spiritual daughter of Bhagvan Vivekananda and my guru, who in a short while imparted to me, without speaking the value of devoted service to the mother and the greatness of the renunciation.' He also wrote a soul-stirring song titled Nivedita Devi, offering homage to his Gnana Guru: 'My salutations to Nivedita who shone as a dedication to spiritual grace, as a temple of love, the sun which dispelled the darkness in my bosom, one who was to our great country like the showers of rains to crops, a great treasure to those who knew no source of wealth and scorching fire to the bondage of *samsaara* or worldly life.'<sup>12</sup>

## Journalistic Activities

The period from 1906 to 1907 was one of busy journalistic activities for Sister Nivedita. Besides writing editorials for *Prabuddha Bharata*, she was contributing to journals like *Sandhya*, *The Dawn* and *New India*. Aurobindo, his younger brother Barindra Ghosh and Swami Vivekananda's younger brother, Bhupendranath Datta, started a new weekly, *Yugantar*, as an organ of the secret revolutionary movement, from March 12, 1906. Not only the decision to start it was taken in Nivedita's house, but also because of her

efforts, the circulation of the journal was built up to more than 50,000 copies. On August 16, 1906, Bipin Chandra Pal started *Bande Mataram* with the cooperation of Aurobindo. The famous revolutionary of the south, Tirumalachari, started *Bala Bharata* from Madras. With the poet-patriot, C. Subramania Bharati. An ardent disciple of Nivedita, as Editor.

On July 20, 1907, when Bhupendranath Datta was imprisoned, Nivedita met him in the court, assured him of taking care of his mother Bhuvaneswari, and the publication of *Yugantar*, and also helped his associates to collect funds for paying a fine of Rs. 10,000/- imposed on him.

In 1907, Nivedita left for England to set a favourable atmosphere for Indian independence through meetings and interviews with British parliamentarians and writings in English journals. One important work of Sister Nivedita was to organize the publication of revolutionary journals from outside India, arranging for their secret distribution in India and organizing the Indian Revolutionaries who were scattered abroad. On Sept 28, 1908, Nivedita left England for America where she met Bhupendranath Datta, Tarak Nath Dutta and other revolutionaries in exile. According to the famous writer Girija Shankar Roy Choudary, Nivedita was, during this tour collecting funds for the rehabilitation of revolutionaries in exile and she had a plan to purchase a building at Chandranagar in the French territory in India, to enable these revolutionaries to settle down there and carry on the activities.

When Nivedita returned to India in 1909, most of her associates were in jails [gaols]. Barindra was undergoing 14 years transportation in Andamans. However, Aurobindo was acquitted in the Alipore bomb case and Nivedita celebrated the event in her school with festivities. But soon, Aurobindo fell again a victim to the wrath of the British because of his writings in *Karmayogin*, and leaving the responsibility of the journals, *Dharma* and *Karmayogin*, into the hands of Nivedita, he went into exile in

Chandranagar and from there secretly to Pondicherry, another French territory where he settled down for the rest of his life (ibid.).

### Organising Dedicated Youth

Nivedita's own dream was to found in Swami Vivekananda's name (as he had done in the name of Sri Ramakrishna) an association which would gather together the future disciples of her guru's national idea. 'I feel myself able to make ten thousand Vivekanandas,' she wrote, 'for just as he could understand and make Ramakrishnas, so I can see in him the things he himself could not. My object will be to keep a set of boys six months, and then to send them out for six months' travel; again six months of study, and so on. ...' From this dedicated organization she saw emerging the watchful leaders of men who, in their turn, would organize 'Indian Vivekananda societies' and 'schools of active political education' throughout the whole vast country.<sup>13</sup>

In the *Gita* she saw a boundless source of power. 'You have in your hands the most perfect instrument that exists,' she said. 'Carry over its teaching into your daily lives. When will the real fighter in the good cause rise up again, the *Gita* in one hand and a sword in the other?' Then she added: 'A hero whose footsteps we can easily follow left us only the other day. ... Swami Vivekananda is quite near to us. We can still walk in his shadow' (285).

She said that

The great task ahead of us is the creation of an order of dedicated missionaries who are prepared to offer their everything at the altar of the mother and worship her by saving her beloved children. What will be the work of these missionaries?

Nivedita herself delineates their task: let the missionary travel with the magic lantern with collections of post cards with a map of India and with head and heart of full ballads stories and geographical descriptions. Let him gather together the women, let him gather together the villagers, let him entertain them in the garden,



in the courtyards, in the verandas, beside the wall, and under the village tree with stories and songs and descriptions of India! India! India. The missionary has to instil in the hearts of the people the great thought, this and no other is our motherland! We are Indians every one!

Nivedita pointed out that this was the plan of action of Swamiji:

This is the meaning of his constant plea, in his published correspondence, for the teaching of the villages, by wandering students, who would carry the magic lantern, the camera, and some means for simple chemical experiments. Again he begs for the inclusion of some secular instruction in the intercourse of the begging friars, with the humbler classes. All this, of course, would be little more than a support and attractive invitation, to the New Learning.<sup>14</sup>

### **'Saffron Flag' as the National Flag**

In her conversation with Aswini Kumar Dutta, the renowned revolutionary, Nivedita revealed that Swamiji wanted her to mould a 'mighty weapon out of the bones of the Bengali youth'. That was why she put Vajrayudha in the centre of the National Flag that she designed. During the Benaras session of the Indian National Congress in 1905, Sister Nivedita played the role of a mediator between the Moderates and the Extremists in the Congress, as she had already won the unstinted love and admiration of leaders of both these wings. It was at her place of stay that these leaders used to have heart to heart talks. At the time of Calcutta Session of the Congress, she organized a Swadeshi Exhibition in which the Nivedita Girls' School exhibited a 'National Flag'. The flag chosen by Nivedita for the country was nothing but the saffron 'Bhagava Dhvaj', which stood as the symbol of the hoary culture, heritage and nationalism of the country. And on the flag was portrayed in yellow colour the Vajrayudha, reminding the people that the great Rishi Dadheechi donated his back-bone to the Devas for making a weapon to fight the Asuras and it was now for the people

to sacrifice their all at the altar of the Mother in this fight against British imperialism.<sup>15</sup>

Nivedita, Christine, Rabindranath, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Abala Bose and others once went to Bodh Gaya in a group. Every evening Nivedita would meditate sitting under the *Bodhivriksha*. A little away from the *Bo'tree*, there lay a stone-slab with an image of a thunderbolt engraved on it. Looking at that image of a thunderbolt, Nivedita said that this should be admitted as the national emblem. When everybody asked her the reasons for her saying this, she explained: 'When someone renounces all his possessions for the good of mankind, he becomes as powerful as a thunderbolt, and performs divinely ordained tasks. The supreme ideal of India is renunciation, so the thunderbolt should be the national emblem of India.'

The thunderbolt reminded Nivedita of Dadhichi's tale of self-sacrifice. Dadhichi voluntarily cast off his body for the need of the gods. The gods killed their enemy—the demon Vritrasura, using the thunderbolt made of his bone. Nivedita designed the national flag of India with the thunderbolt as the emblem. Later, to honour the desire of Nivedita, Jagadish Chandra Bose engraved the image of thunderbolt on the top of 'Basu Vijnan Mandir'.<sup>16</sup>

Nivedita desired to make the Vajra or Thunderbolt a symbol because according to ancient traditions it signified honour, purity, wisdom, sanctity, and energy.

As early as 1905, Nivedita started working out her idea. In a letter dated 8th February, she wrote to Miss MacLeod: 'We have chosen a design for a National Flag—the Thunderbolt and have already made one. Unfortunately, I took the Chinese War Flag as my ideal, and made it black on red. This does not appeal to India—so the next is to be yellow on scarlet.'<sup>17</sup> Nivedita got another flag embroidered by her pupils in scarlet and yellow and had it displayed in the Exhibition organized by the Congress in 1905. Many eminent

persons, Dr J C Bose among them, accepted this symbol and started using it. When, in 1909, the question of a national flag was openly discussed in the press, an article on the 'Vajra as the National Flag', together with its pictures, was published in the *Modern Review*. Nivedita wrote:

The question of the invention of a flag for India is beginning to be discussed in the press. Those who contemplate the desirability of such a symbol, however, seem to be unaware that already a great many people have taken up, and are using, the ancient Indian Vajra or Thunderbolt, in this way. ... For while this symbolism cannot be imparted piecemeal to those outside the circle of its enthusiasm, it can and must be handed on from generation to generation, and province to province.<sup>18</sup>

### **Mother India—Her Chosen Deity**

Freedom of India has been attained, but we are yet to free ourselves from the bondage of intellectual slavery. The western materialistic outlook and a carving to raise the standard of living at the cost of standard of life is eating into the core of vitals of our national life. It is carrying a need of the hour to arouse once again the patriotic sentiments and spirit of deep respect and reverence to the eternal values of life propounded by our great masters, in the hearts of our people, especially the younger generation. She has given the clarion call: Age succeeds age in India, and even the voice of the Mother calls upon her children to worship her with now offerings, with renewal of their own greatness. Today she asks, as a household mother of the strong men whom she has borne and bred that we show to her not gentleness and submission, but manly strength and invincible might. Today she would have us play before her with the sword. Today she would find herself the mother of a hero clan. Today she cry once more that she is hungered and only by the lives and blood of the Kings and men, can the citadel be saved (4.295).

She used to recite every moment, like a sacred mantra: 'Bharatavarsha, Bharatavarsha.' And she would become ecstatic while doing this. She

held everything in India as sacred, deserving worship. She would hold a specific practice in high esteem, even if it might have lately fallen into disuse, only because it must have been beneficent for India in the past. Before boarding a boat from a ghat on the river Ganga, she would touch its water to her head like any other Hindu woman. She would always keep her hands folded in the gesture of *pranaama* whenever she approached any temple or a deity.<sup>19</sup>

'Mother India' soon appeared to be the divine Energy—Shakti—clothed in the foam of the sea, the red dust of Malabar, the mud of the Ganges, the sands of the Punjab, the snows of Kashmir. To bewitch men, She let Herself be worshiped according to all the rites, and in all the temples. 'Instead of being the slaves of an unknowable Brahman let us be Her slaves,' cried Nivedita.<sup>20</sup>

India, 'Mother India', had become her *Ishta*, the supreme object of her devotion, in which she perceived the aim of her life and the place of her acceptance. She was to live now, in and for the great design of which her guru had dreamed: an India in which the masses—the ignorant, the poor, the illiterate, the cobbler, the sweeper—were to be the flesh and blood of 'Mother India'.

### **Daily Congregation and Training of Workers**

Nivedita has emphatically declared: 'If the whole of India could agree to give, say, ten minutes every evening, at the oncoming of darkness to thinking a single thought, "We are one. We are one. Nothing can prevail against us to make us think we are divided. For we are one We are one and all antagonisms amongst us are illusion"—the power that would be generated can hardly be measured.'<sup>21</sup>

She said,

Brahmacharins are necessary, but not young men whose ideal is passivity. I want you to be active, with the brahmacharya of a hero, assimilating

all the experiences of life whatever they may be, without running away from them. For love and hatred are dualities which will disappear. I want men who can face life squarely and find God in the manifestation of their sacrifice. The goddess of your worship, Mother India, dwells in famine, in suffering, and in poverty rather than on the altars where you offer her flowers and incense. She is where your sacrifice is!<sup>22</sup>

### ***Stress on Physical Culture and Martial Arts***

In the month of October 1902, Nivedita reached Nagpur. There, at the local Morris College, she was invited to preside over a meeting, and was made to give away prizes to the participants in the cricket game. After the prize-giving ceremony she took the students to serious task in her lecture. That was the time of the *Dusserah* festival. Nivedita said that it was indeed a matter of great shame for the students to enjoy joyously a foreign game during the days of *Dusserah* when they should instead worship war weapons, and invoke strength from the Goddess Durga by worshipping her. Had she known this before, she certainly would not have agreed to preside over the meeting. She hoped that in the capital of the great 'Bhonsle' kings, she would see some demonstration of heroic feats of the Marathas. She was indeed sad not being able to see that. Nivedita demanded from the students that on the next day they must demonstrate before her sword-fighting, wrestling and other exercises on martial arts. Most of the college students did not know any such exercise. Somehow a few boys from outside and only one college student were made ready for this; they showed her the exercises as desired by her. She then said to the students that they were lately getting more higher studies, more than the required number of graduates were being turned out from the universities, who with their broken health could hardly protect themselves, not to speak of protecting the dignity of their mothers and sisters. The society would not derive any

benefit from these heaps of debris. The country demanded true patriots, powerful in body and mind. The country had no need of those people who would serve their foreign masters while hounding their fellow countrymen. Only powerful patriots could raise the country.

Two years thereafter in the month of January 1904 she lectured before the students in the same spirit at Patna. She said, '... I shall be sorry to see immeasurable calm on the face of the boys. ... I should like to see you wrestling, boxing, fencing with each other rather than to see you calm. We want strong men.'<sup>23</sup>

Nivedita's call to the youth was, 'The hero is one who fights, loves fighting and his supreme joy is to be beaten by one who is his superior after fighting his best. Fight, fight and fight again but not with meanness and not with rancour' (33).

She detested pretentiousness and arrogance. Of the Hindus who declared, 'We are ready to give our lives for India,' she demanded, point-blank, 'Can you handle a weapon? Can you shoot? No? Well, go and learn!' She unmasked those who were not sure of themselves, and sent them away.

'To gain the princess of his choice,' she said, 'Arjuna had a steady enough hand and a quick enough eye to hit the target when he could only see it reflected in a pool. Nowadays the Hindu, because he is accused of cowardice, must possess enough self-mastery to strike and pay for it with his blood: that is the first stage in the yoga of honour.' And she added:

'The ideal struggle would be to conquer through nonviolence preached by our sages, but are we capable of it? No! Our generation, reared in the acceptance of submission to the foreigner, lives in a pessimistic atmosphere. Let us start by getting out of it. The nonviolence which in theory we value so much is worthless in practice until the day when we are strong enough to strike an irresistible blow and decide not to do so. The man who does not strike because he is weak



commits a sin. The man who does not strike because he is afraid is a coward. Krishna accused Arjuna of hypocrisy because he refused to fight on the battlefield. 'Rise up!' he said to him. 'Go and fight! You speak like a sage, but your actions betray you and show you for a coward!'<sup>24</sup>

It was during the summer days of 1903. Nivedita was coming to Medinipur. Many people assembled at the railway station to greet her. The moment she alighted from the train, the crowd shouted, 'Hip, Hip, Hooray'. They thought that the white-skinned English lady should better be greeted in that fashion. But Nivedita looked utterly shocked. Waving her hand she asked them to stop. Then she explained that 'Hip, Hip, Hooray' was the victory shout of the English people, and the Indians should by no means use that. She raised her hand and shouted three times: *Wah Guruki Fateh, Bol Babujiko Khalsa*. The entire crowd joined her in shouting.<sup>25</sup>

### **Emphasis on Sacrifice, Renunciation, and Fearlessness**

Nivedita's stress on simple life and austerity was clearly manifest in her activities. One day,

It was noon and so it was extremely hot, as it was the summer session. On reaching her room, she immediately opened all the doors and windows. Waves of hot air filled the room, but she didn't bother at all. She removed the mattress laid on the cot and unrolled her own small mat and a thin kantha (bed spread) over that. As everybody was struck with wonder, she said, 'I am practising austerity. And I want you to practise it because of the nature of the task you're set upon to perform. No luxury befits those who want to free their country' (33-4).

Once,

A huge crowd attended her lecture on the first day, but hearing her politically charged words, many people, out of fear, left the meeting before it came to an end. One retired Government employee informed her of the happening. He

also expressed his apprehensions that in subsequent meetings not many people might attend. Nivedita replied: 'Don't try to frighten me. My veins still carry the blood of an independent nation. My lectures are not meant for those who feel scared.' Thereafter the attendance really became thin. But, undaunted, Nivedita gave her lectures on all the five days with equal zeal. She opened a gymnasium for the local youths to practice martial arts. She encouraged the youths by herself fencing with the sword, rounding the mace and club and in other exercises. She also taught a girl how to fire a gun (34).

The artist Nandalal Bose was then a student of the Art School. One day he and another promising student of the school, Surendranath Gangopadhyaya, went to meet Nivedita at her Bosepara Lane residence. They took their seat on the sofa in the drawing room. A carpet was laid on the floor. Nivedita asked them to sit on the floor. They did take their seats on the floor but were offended, as they thought that the European lady had insulted them by advising so. But how wrong they were, they realized a little after. Nivedita looked at them intently for a while, then said: 'You belong to the land of the Buddha. I do not feel happy to see you seated on a sofa. Now as you sit like Buddha, I find it so good to look at you' (59).

### **Nivedita's Contribution to Literature, Art, and Education**

Sister Nivedita was not merely a patriotic daughter of Mother India, she had really sought her identity with the spirit of India. Her prolific writings like the *Master As I Saw Him*, *Kali the Mother*, *The Web of Indian Life*, *Cradle Tales of Hinduism*, *Aggressive Hinduism*, *Footfalls of Indian History*, *Civic Ideal And Indian Nationality*, and *Hints on National Education in India* and her several letters to friends and devotees all reverberate the voice of the sages and seers of ancient India. Her writings on Indian art gave a new direction and sense of purpose to the artistes of

modern period like Abanindranath Tagore. In the educational field, her contribution was unique in that she gave for the first time a practical system harmoniously blending the ancient spiritual and cultural values with modern scientific outlook.

### **Nivedita—A Mystic**

The fact that Nivedita had a mystic vision of Kali is pointed out by Bepin Chandra Pal who narrates an incident:

Once I was sitting with Nivedita in her house in Bosepara lane, sipping tea out of a quaint swadeshi cup. Suddenly the sky was over cast with black scowling clouds as oftentimes happens in our early summer evenings; and there was immediately a marked change in the mood of my hostess. Her face seemed at once to reflect this awesome dynamic mood of nature. It beamed with a new light, at once to reflect this awfully dynamic mood of nature. It beamed with a new light, at once awful and lovely. And she sat silent, apparently unconscious for the moment of my presence, looking intensely through the window at the gathering gloom about the earth and the heaven, and listening like one in a trance, to the rising tumult of the glowing storm. And just as there came in a little while the flash of lightning followed by the crash of the first thunder, she cried out with bated breath—*Kalee!*

### **Prayer to the Motherland**

When Sri Aurobindo had to go into exile, Sister Nivedita took over the responsibility of editing his journal, *Karma* Yogin. In the thirty-sixth number, dated March 12th, 1910, she published her credo. This prayer was really her will: her renunciation of all political life. She had composed it as she drew for her pupils the flag of free India—two gold vajras in the shape of a cross, on a red back-ground:

I believe that India is one, indissoluble, indivisible. National Unity is built on the common home, the common interest, and the common love.

I believe that the strength which spoke in the Vedas and Upanishads, in the making of religions and empires, in the learning of scholars and the meditation of the saints, is born once more amongst us, and its name today is Nationality.


I believe that the present of India is deep-rooted in her past, and that before her shines a glorious future.

O Nationality, come thou to me as joy or sorrow, as honor or as shame! Make me thine own!<sup>26</sup>

### **Into Eternal Sleep**

The enormous strain that Nivedita had undergone over the years had shattered her health. In September 1910, she herself wrote: 'I have still two years left, but no more.' In November 1910, she went to America to be by the side of her friend, Mrs. Bull, who bequeathed a large fortune to her for her work in India and died in January 1911. On return to India, Nivedita spent her summer holidays in Mayavati with the Bose family. They wanted to spend the pooja holidays at Darjeeling. Nivedita had the premonition of her end and she bid farewell to every one of her friends in Calcutta before leaving for Darjeeling. The stay in the Hill-station proved unsuitable to her health and she suffered an attack of blood dysentery in the first week of October. She knew that her journey's end had come. She wrote her last will on October 7, leaving all her possessions and writing in the hands of the trustees of Belur Math to be used for her school. On October 9, she entered in her diary the note of her complete surrender to the lord and her pen ceased to write. On October 13, 1911, at about 7 am., the sun unusually shone, in spite of the cloudy days in Darjeeling. Nivedita said: 'The frail boat is sinking, but i shall yet see the sun rise.' Chanting the Rudra Prayer of the Upanishad '*Asatoma sad gamaya, Tamaso maa jyotir gamaya, mrityor maa amritam gamaya*— From the unreal lead us to the real, from darkness lead us to the light, from death lead us to immortality' – Nivedita breathed her last breath. The dedicated Daughter of Mother India went to sleep for ever in her

lap. Today. In distant Darjeeling, there stands a memorial in which, on a marble tablet, are inscribed these words: 'Here Reposes Sister Nivedita Who Gave Her All to India.'

Let us all join together and pay homage to the great 'Daughter of Mother Bharat' by chanting from the bottom of our hearts the Immortal Mantra—*Vande Mataram!* 

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*Sister Nivedita along with Mother Sevier, Sister Christine, and Lady Abala Bose at Mayavati*







## ***Nivedita***

**Malachi O'Doherty**

These bring testament from India to how she is known there and only to a lesser extent try to explain her through her Irish and British roots. She grew up in England and was educated in an orphan school after her father died.

In the Western tradition of biography, informed by schools of psychology rather than spiritual tradition, we would assume that the loss of her father would have been hugely significant in the formation of her character. The father is also part of her spiritual story, for she compiled his sermons in adult life and clearly admired his thinking.

She travelled to India in her late twenties and took on the life of a Hindu nun. Even then she travelled frequently to the West, to England, Ireland, Continental Europe, and the US, carrying on the work of her deceased guru Swami Vivekananda who had travelled as widely himself.

While she wore the robes of a brahmacharini—a celibate nun, and preached widely, it would be a mistake to see her as having been a withdrawn contemplative.

She is revered in India as one who gave her life to service, who endorsed by her conviction the spiritual tradition of India and inspired a generation to accept Swamiji's vision, that India would earn its right to independence from the British Empire by defining itself as a nation with a rich spiritual tradition.

An attempt to rewrite her story for the West would have to take into account the different way in which she is likely to be read and understood there. It could not be the starting point for

**W**RITINGS ON THE LIFE OF Sister Nivedita suffer from her having worked and died so far from where she was born. She came from Dungannon in County Tyrone, Ireland. There have been recent efforts to educate people there about her life and work.

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a Western readership that she was a saint, though some indeed accept that.

But the Indian understanding of her can also be enriched by information about her life before she met Swamiji in London. The best source material for understanding her life, after all, her letters, has been preserved by the Ramakrishna Mission without fear that an assessment of her character from them would diminish her.

Nivedita's father was a Methodist minister but Margaret Noble—to use her original name—or Margot, as she preferred—went through periods of enthusiasm for other religious perspectives, including High Church Anglicanism and Christian Science, before becoming a disciple of Swamiji.

She is variously written about by Indian sources as the daughter of a priest and the descendant of Irish revolutionaries. Both claims are misleading. Her father would not commonly have been thought of as part of a priesthood, more the leader of a congregation than the officiator directing it, and she, in fact, described herself often as English and even as 'the most loyal Englishwoman.'<sup>1</sup>

She was aware of Irish political demands for Home Rule but she was born into a generation which was more stable than those which preceded it and which came after. An Irish reader will also find it significant that she was from a sect of Protestantism, the strand that had refused the papal authority in Rome. Protestants were more likely to identify themselves with Britain and less likely to have a role within Irish nationalist agitation, though some did.

Margaret Noble had made a considerable journey away from her Irish and Methodist roots before the age of twenty and her arrival in London.

Her writing shows that she was well read in philosophy and comparative religion. She had at

least a smattering of French. She could write on politics, education, and art. This was without the benefit of a university education or even what would now be regarded as a complete secondary education. She was clearly a person of superior intelligence who would have distinguished herself even if she had not gone to India.

She was born in 1867. Ireland was governed by Britain at the time. It was not a colony in the sense that India was, though the distinction may not have seemed very great to people in either country at the time. Ireland was inside the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland. The people participated in British elections and sent Members of Parliament (MP) to Westminster.

India was simply governed by a Viceroy's diktat. There were no Indians standing for election to the British parliament. There were no Indian MPs who could stand in the great debating chamber and raise issues of concern to constituents in Lucknow or Madras, the way Irish politicians from Wexford and Donegal might have drawn the attention of Ministers to conditions at home.

Ireland, in theory, had access to the reins of power that governed the Empire. In reality, the number of MPs was too small to make a significant difference.

Ireland was governed more sternly than other parts of the UK like Wales or Cornwall. There was a tighter military presence there, ever alert to the potential for revolution.

Just twenty years before her birth Ireland suffered a catastrophic famine which halved the population as refugees fled and others starved. Even today the population is lower than it was before that horrific decade. Ireland was a poor country at the time, largely dependent on agriculture. Farmers were mostly tenants on large estates owned by British aristocrats. The main crop was the potato, and the Irish peasantry thrived

so well on their basic diet that the average Irish soldier in the British army before the famine was taller than his English or Scottish counterpart.

But in 1845 and for successive years, the crop failed, infected by blight.

Young Margaret surely heard the stories from her grandfather of the dead and dying struggling to survive off weeds and scraps in their little stone cabins on hillside farms where the rocky land offered them nothing.

The trail of refugees to the overcrowded ships that would carry them to Liverpool or the US and the mass desertion of the land by those neighbours who could manage to get away would all have been recent history to her.

Yet she was born into an Ireland in which conditions were better. The near eradication of the poorest peasantry by famine had led to marked changes. The Irish language of those peasants had almost disappeared. Farms had grown larger as the small farms of the dead were bundled together and made more productive.

The Catholic Church had developed a stronger presence in the country as the primary religious authority. There were other churches too, the established Anglican Church of Ireland, a sister church of the Church of England, the more democratic Presbyterian church and several smaller churches.

It is important to make some distinctions here before explaining the journey that Margaret was on. She had been born into a branch of the Methodist church, itself a breakaway from Anglicanism. She appears to have moved much closer to High Church Anglicanism, an English tradition that worships in rituals and under a theology which is close to that of the Papal Roman Catholic Church. Before she left London she had committed herself to a much different community of belief around the ideas of Christian Science and Spiritualism.

Christian Science was perhaps a reaction against the scientific discoveries of her generation which had disproven the literal truth of the Christian Scripture, the Bible. It was a means of rediscovering a way of being Christian that had scientific validity, particularly as a healing method.

Spiritualism was a belief that the dead are always close to us and can be communicated with. In refutation of the scientific arguments against religion, Christian Science and Spiritualism argued that their insights were verifiable. The sick could be healed by prayer and the spirits of the dead could be spoken to. These ideas had been fully and enthusiastically absorbed by Margaret Nobel before she met Swamiji. Yet there were echoes of her family's historical religious concerns in the teaching of Swamiji.

The Methodists were not the establishment. They were a breakaway from Anglicanism led by the charismatic preacher John Wesley. The Primitive Methodists to which her grandfather belonged were a breakaway from mainstream Methodism, still loyal to Wesley. They were evangelising Christians and they were itinerant. That is not to say that they travelled the roads, but that they saw themselves bringing a mission to the Irish poor. That mission was to teach that God's grace could be experienced and that that experience was the crucial part of a proper religious life. So though this teaching would have been impressed on her by her guru and was integral also to her belief in Christian Science, it was inherent in the religious faith of her family too.

Margaret would take a meandering spiritual journey, but in her guru Swamiji she heard echoes of the teachings she had heard in her childhood. Her father and grandfather, like Swamiji, were not the appointees of a bishop, the protectors of a rich church's property, guardians of a fixed and local congregation. They were



men who moved from place to place, seeking to win converts by the power of their oratory and the example of their devotion. Swamiji would have recognised them as people of his own type.

Margaret's father's calling was not political but spiritual. But the key idea that the poor could be uplifted first through being helped to rediscover their traditional Christian values also resonates with the teaching of Nivedita years later in India. For both father and daughter as also for Swamiji, religion and politics were inseparable.

Margaret's father's work took him to the north of England to train for his ministry among the workers in the textile mills of Liverpool and Manchester. Reverend Noble appears not to have had any sense of a need to stand closer to the Irish poor than to the English poor, to the beleaguered farm hand than to the factory worker. This suggests that considerations of Irish political independence did not have great influence over him.

Margaret and her sister Mary went as small children to England to be with their father. They were, from then on, likely to grow up thinking of themselves as English, with very little connection to Ireland.

The great tragedy of their young lives was their father dying in 1877 when Margaret was nine years old. Faced with the loss of a family income, her mother moved back to Ireland with the youngest child, a boy, Richmond, and later enrolled the two girls, Margaret and Mary in an orphan school. This was the Crossley Heath Orphan Home and School in Savile Park, Halifax. There were four years between the death of her father and her enrolment at Crossley Heath. We do not know how the family survived in that time. There may have been family money to support them.

We know from the letters of Nivedita to her sister Mary in later years that their mother had been a difficult woman. Mary seems to have been

more distressed by her mother's treatment of her than Margaret was. At least, Margaret argued that her mother's 'faults were all on the surface' (2.1049), a suggestion that one had to get to know her well to appreciate her qualities. Margaret is clearly urging Mary to forgive their mother though for what we don't know.

Their fate in being sent to an orphan school need not evoke feelings of horror informed by Dickensian accounts of orphanages and poor houses. This was a prosperous institution and was liberal for its day. It had been established for the orphan children of clergy and appears to have been well funded by philanthropists. Nivedita is now listed among distinguished alumni of the school on its website.<sup>2</sup>

The headmaster, William Barber was an expert on Shakespeare and he wrote a book called *The Religious Difficulty in National Education*. So he was, at least a cultured and thoughtful

William Cambridge Barber



man. His school was staffed by a matron, a headmistress, and eight assistant teachers for two-hundred and sixteen 'scholar orphans', mostly boys. The school looked after these children until they were sixteen years old.<sup>3</sup>

That Margaret Noble was well read and highly literate in adult life must be a credit to the only formal education she had, which was at Crossley Heath. In earlier years the education of girls there had focussed on needlework and domestic skills, preparing them only to be good wives and housekeepers. Following the Education Act of 1870 the school expanded its facilities for girls and enabled them to graduate with the Cambridge Local examination. The scholars were, however, cut off from their families. Even if the girls' mother could have traveled often from Ireland to see them she would only have been allowed access to them for two hours a month and only on the first Tuesday. Margaret was there for three years. Her sister Mary was there for five.

If the girls were aware while at school of political developments in Ireland they would have known of the burgeoning campaign for Home Rule. The term Home Rule, in the Irish context, meant self-government but not full national independence. Governing rights would have been devolved from London to Dublin but the British monarch would have remained the head of state and some powers would have been reserved by London, foreign policy for instance. This is essentially the system under which Scotland and Northern Ireland are currently governed.

In 1886, after Margaret had left Crossley Heath, Prime Minister William Gladstone brought his first of two bills before parliament to allow Home Rule for Ireland. Gladstone argued that if the House did not grant Home Rule to Ireland voluntarily it would eventually have to concede it as a necessity, meaning that the Irish would in time insist on it so forcibly that they

could not be refused. He lost by thirty votes and the immediate fallout was rioting in Belfast, hopes having been raised and then dashed.

After Crossley Heath, Margaret took her first teaching post in Keswick at the age of sixteen. Her biographer Lizelle Reymond says that this was a time at which she was impressed by a more lavish style of worship than she would have known as a Methodist. In *The Master As I Saw Him*, she would draw comparisons and contrasts between Swamiji's chanting and Gregorian chant.

In those days before sound recording was popular she would only have heard Gregorian chant at High Church services, perhaps in Crossley Heath and in Keswick. It would not have been part of her Methodist form of worship.

That Anglican form of worship is also closer to the style of the Hindu puja with its flowers and bells and incense than to the more undramatised form used within evangelical churches. A key difference is that evangelical Christians and most Protestants revere text rather than image. Hinduism, in a sense, is like Catholicism in its love of image and incense; Protestantism is like Islam in its primary, almost exclusive, focus on the text of scripture.

Margaret had crossed from a text centred form of worship to a form filled with colour, flowers, and candle light and which included the reverence of icons. In later years she would express her sadness that Catholicism had no place for her. Unlike the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji that she had adopted, Catholicism saw other religious movements as heathen and heretical. 'I always feel like an exiled and repudiated child of the Church Catholic, and she in my eyes so unspeakably great and blessed.'<sup>4</sup>

Keswick was a remote part of the English Lake District, a setting of extraordinary mountain beauty which had awakened the mystical temperament of the poet William Wordsworth.

It would not be reckless speculation to suppose that Nivedita, apart from discovering a more lavish form of worship, also encountered Wordsworth's poetry there, in the landscape which inspired him to writing about nature as suffused with a spiritual presence.

We know very little of Margaret's life at this time. We may speculate that the job in Keswick had been found for her by Crossley Heath, keen to protect a young woman on her own from the moral dangers of life in the city by sending her to a remote area. We may suppose also, perhaps, that she left Keswick to be more involved in the busy world, to make friends, perhaps to improve her chances of finding a husband.

She then is said to have worked a year in Rugby teaching girls and then to have gone to Wrexham, both urban settings contrasting sharply with the life she had enjoyed in Keswick. It is significant that she pursued her life and career in England rather than Ireland. But this was a time of political ferment in Ireland and she must have been aware of it for the centre of much of the struggle was the British Parliament. She was in Keswick when the Home Rule Bill collapsed. She went through at least three different jobs in different parts of England in her late teens and twenties before settling in London. She also entered another religious phase.

Having moved from Methodism to engaging with High Church Anglicanism she now developed an interest in Christian Science. This was a new religion formed in the United States by Mary Baker Eddy. It had common threads with the Higher Thought Movement of Phineas Quimby. These taught essentially, that health and spiritual well-being were the same thing, that good physical health followed from a realisation of God's immanence. The first congregation of the Church of Christian Science in England was close to where Margaret lived in

London. She may have been drawn there to be part of that congregation or she may have discovered it while there.

She was also closely involved with the Higher Thought Centre in Chenniston Gardens and continued to speak highly of it when she was in India. She believed that her induction into Christian Science was an intrinsic and necessary part of her journey towards Vedanta. 'I think the London Christian Science ... has been entirely subservient to the higher consciousness—don't you? I know I can have no doubt that it made a bridge for me to the Vedanta as I cannot imagine anything else doing' (I.13).

We know from the first chapter of *The Master As I Saw Him* that Margaret had suffered through loss of religious faith. There she describes herself as having been a sceptic. She suggests that she had already transcended and rejected some theologies. She gives a sense of the variety of friends she had in London, and the diversity of their religious thinking, when she describes the group which had invited Swami Vivekananda to address them. She says that they had been selected for their 'unwillingness to believe'.<sup>5</sup> They had come from different religious groupings which were reassessing religious orthodoxies. They included Christian Scientists and Christian Socialists and some who were interested in Buddhism. Nivedita says that the Christian Socialist in the company was 'the least unconventional' (ibid.). She described the host as having 'made of an extended psychology the centre of a faith' (ibid.). There is a tone of disparagement in Nivedita's phrasing though it is not clear that this is an assessment she made at the time or on reflection a decade later. After the first talk, the friends commented to each other that what Vivekananda had said 'was not new' (ibid.) to them. She wrote of her own habit of caution 'born of the constant need of protecting the judgment against



ill-considered enthusiasm' (ibid.). She had been through previous periods of conversion which she had since outgrown.

She had undoubtedly been disillusioned in a previous religious conviction or she would not have written, 'And one shrinks from the pain and humiliation of spirit that such experiences involve' (22). She had 'long mourned' (23) over her own loss of faith in Christian symbolism and had been studying whether the teaching had a value 'apart from its objective truth or untruth' (ibid.).

The girl who had left an orphan school at sixteen to teach in the most remote part of England had become part of a community of London intellectuals by her mid-twenties. Had she done little more with her life after that, this transformation alone would have been remarkable. She was now not an assistant teacher in a remote country school but an educationalist experimenting in London with the most liberal new ideas of the time. She was mixing with writers and thinkers who were bringing major religious teachers to London to hear their views on their traditions.

This eclectic approach to religion, including the study of the Bahá'í faith and others, prepared her well for the ideas cherished by the Ramakrishna Mission, that their founder had realised the truth of all faiths as viable routes on the journey to enlightenment. Margaret and her friends had already made the step of accepting that spiritual truths might be learnt from other traditions before they had heard that point insisted upon by Swamiji. Had they not already made that step, they would not have gone to hear him. So she was clearly acquainted with movements which explored spiritual ideas outside Christianity before she met Swamiji. And she was already acquainted with ideas similar to those he brought to London, so familiar indeed that some of her companions, after Swamiji's first talk, dismissed it as 'nothing new'.

Her meeting with Swamiji was not a random

event. Margaret was no social butterfly who merely turned up at a friend's house to see an exotic swami speak; she was one of a group of active seekers who had heard other writers and religious thinkers address them, who discussed these ideas among themselves, and felt they were wrestling with loss of faith. This is not how Margaret's family would have viewed her religious responsibility. The Methodism of her father and grandfather saw salvation as being possible only through Jesus Christ.

In London at the time of Swamiji's visit and Margaret's involvement with Christian Science there was a fervent interest in religious and spiritual alternatives to familiar Christianity. In London Margaret may have known of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, itself turning to India for guidance or The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was experimenting with the Occult.

Swamiji himself commented on the Occult movements in London at the time. A journalist had asked him what he thought of such movements. He said, 'I am the exponent of no occult societies, nor do I believe that good can come of such bodies. Truth stands on its own authority, and truth can bear the light of day.'<sup>6</sup>

Swamiji had himself met Christian Scientists before coming to London, and it may be that it was they who had directed him to groups in London who would be eager to hear him speak. Belle Hale, a Christian Scientist in Chicago approached him when she saw him tired on the street. He befriended her whole family and wrote to her in later years more frequently than to most of his other associates in the West. When he was ill on his second trip, he joked with her that even her Christian Science might not heal him. He called her Mother Church. He wrote to Mary Hale, her daughter, in 1899, '... it is curious your family, Mother Church and her clergy, both

monastic and secular, have made more impression on me than any family I know of. Lord bless you ever and ever' (8.474). So further researches into the relationships developed by Swamiji and Nivedita should study that Christian Science movement more closely.

Margaret, as Nivedita, later wrote that she believed she had been ripe for discipleship under Swamiji because she 'knew little'<sup>7</sup> though she had hungered for spiritual insight.

Suppose He had not come to London that time! Life would have been like a headless torso—for I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did. But if I had known more of life, I should perhaps have doubted whether when the time came I should certainly recognise. Fortunately, I knew little, and was spared that torture. ... always I had this burning voice within, but nothing to utter. How often and often I have sat down, pen in hand, to speak, and there was no speech. And now, there is no end to it! As surely as I am fitted to my world—so surely is my world in need of me, waiting, ready. The arrow has found its own place in the bow. But *if* He had not come! If He had meditated on the Himalayan peaks ... I, for one, had never never been here.<sup>8</sup>

There is a paradox here in that she confirms that she was a seeker while professing that she 'knew little'. Even at the age of twenty in 1887 she had shown an acquaintance with eastern religion and Greek philosophy in an article quoted by her biographer Lizelle Reymond.

It is impossible, as we watch the sweet story [of Jesus] grow, to help thinking of the Old Indian Buddha, who was tempted and tried, yet became the blessed, so many centuries before. We cannot repress the thought of Socrates, as we look at this life's stern loyalty to truth with its winning lowliness and grace. Undoubtedly they are there, Buddha and Socrates, but

whether their memories fall athwart the cradle of the Christ, or whether they agree as brethren sprung from the common soul of human genius, who can tell?<sup>9</sup>

She is already asking if spiritual truth can be found beyond Christianity, if a 'common soul' informs diverse religious and philosophical traditions. But there was another sense in which Margaret was undeveloped in London; she was unmarried, she had had little acquaintance with men other than as friends and workmates. She had lost her father at nine years old. Yet she had many friendships with men.

It is easy psychology, but not easily dismissed, to suppose that in Swamiji she found a father figure to revere. She explicitly says that she was primarily attracted to the man rather than to the teaching. 'I saw that although he had a system of thought to offer, nothing in that system would claim him for a moment, if he found that truth led elsewhere.'<sup>10</sup> And we know from his letters to her, May 1897, that he warned her against becoming emotionally dependent on him. 'I see persons giving me almost the whole of their love. But I must not give anyone the whole of mine in return, for that day the work would be ruined.'<sup>11</sup>

There was a painful tension between Nivedita and her guru which she wrote about frankly. 'In that awful time at Almora, when I thought he had put me out of his life contemptuously, it still made no difference to the essentials. Now he is the whole living, for good or for evil; instead of growing less, I have grown infinitely more personal in my love.'<sup>12</sup>

If we look at the essentials of Nivedita's life before she went to India and her preoccupations there when she was at her busiest, we find in the one an echo of the other. She did not renounce a way of being, she enhanced it. She felt that she became the person she had been trying to be, pursuing her chief passions, religion and politics

by the same methods as before, journalism and public speaking and integrating herself into the intellectual circles of the city.

Margaret Noble—Sister Nivedita—was not just a religious thinker but a political campaigner, both in London and later in Bengal. She was part of a Free Ireland group in London, before she met Swamiji, and she campaigned for Home Rule in Ireland.

In this period, one Irishman became a huge story. Charles Stewart Parnell offered Ireland the hope of Home Rule. As a member of the Irish parliamentary party he had won Prime Minister Gladstone over to the cause. Self-government for Ireland seemed within reach. But Parnell fell from influence into disgrace when he was found to be having an affair with a married woman. His offence, adultery, may have been more shocking in those moralistic Victorian times but even a hundred years later in Britain a politician might have lost authority and position for the same reason. Parnell's Ireland recoiled from him and broke him.

Margaret must have known the significance of this scandal and felt that her own favoured

*Patrick Pearse (1879–1916)*



political project, Home Rule for Ireland, had been let down, had lost its momentum. She was past regarding herself as Irish but the question of Home Rule for Ireland had won significant support in England and she was part of that movement.

Parnell's stature in Ireland was comparable to that of Nehru's fifty years later. As the man who was seen as most likely to deliver Home Rule for Ireland, his perceived squandering of that opportunity was demoralising.

Parnell had represented one strand of nationalism in Ireland, that which invested its hopes in political progress through parliament. There was another which sought violent revolution. In time it would take over as the predominant expression of Ireland's claim to be totally free of Britain.

It may be reasonable to speculate that when Nivedita spoke in favour of revolutionary protest in India years later, she was speaking out of a disillusionment with hopes being realised in any other way, a disillusionment acquired in the failed campaign for Home Rule for Ireland. We may also be free to speculate that the collapse of her political hopes for Ireland freed her to give more of her attention to her spiritual rather than her political self-development, to seek meaning not first in political progress but in spiritual enlightenment.

Her thinking would progress along lines similar to those of Irish people who lost hope in change through political endeavour. Nationalism in Ireland would become Catholic and Gaelic. It would now seek to define the nation as worthy of independence by virtue of its religious and cultural distinctiveness. This is precisely how, in later years Nivedita would seek to help redefine India. Had she gone back to Ireland rather than to India, she might have found herself challenged in a very similar way, to focus on the same issues that informed her writing and speaking.

Ireland and India turned in the same direction in the same period. The Gaelic League was



formed in 1893, two years before Margaret went to India. The project of the Gaelic League was to 'de anglicise Ireland' to revive the language and even ancient sports, to present an image of Ireland as a nation with its own distinctive culture and character.

Margaret Noble, as Nivedita, found her voice in India. She developed a passionate eloquence under the tutelage of one of the greatest orators of her time, Vivekananda. She took up his project and wrote vigorously to evangelise for the great idea, that India could be a nation if it returned to its spiritual roots and that then its claim for independence would become irrefutable.

She wrote as an Indian, as a Hindu. 'Let us expect of our own country and our own people, the highest and noblest and most progressive outlook that any people in the world might take. And in doing this, let us look to become Hindus, in a true sense, for the first time.'<sup>13</sup>

This took extraordinary courage from a foreigner, appropriating an Indian Hindu identity and claiming to speak for the whole country. How had that spirit come out of Dungannon or Crossley Orphan School?

There is little likelihood that Reverend Noble, who only knew his little girl to the age of nine, foresaw that she would grow to speak so loudly, so authoritatively, and to challenge so much. And it is not difficult to imagine that she might also have written like this, had she stayed in Ireland to call the people there back to their ancient traditions. For others did.

Another writer, a contemporary, back home in Ireland was writing similarly aphoristic claims to the oneness of nationalism and spirituality. Patrick Pearse would go on to be a warrior and a willing martyr for the free Ireland he envisaged, walking willingly to the firing squad to make a sacrifice he likened to Jesus Christ's. He wrote: 'Independence one must understand to include

spiritual and intellectual independence ... or rather, true political independence requires spiritual and intellectual independence as its basis, or it tends to become unstable.'<sup>14</sup> In the same essay, 'The Spiritual Nation', so similar in tone and argument to the writings of Nivedita, he wrote, 'Now, I think that one may speak of a national soul and of a national mind, ... I believe that there is really a spiritual tradition which is the soul of Ireland, the thing which makes Ireland a living nation' (300–1). Compare that to Nivedita's words: 'Like the fire that wraps a forest in flame, is the power of the mind of a whole nation.'<sup>15</sup> Or, 'We see Hinduism no longer as the preserver of Hindu custom, but *as the creator of the Hindu character*' (509).

For Pearse the language of religion was the language of nationalism as he saw it. 'I do not know if the Messiah has yet come, and I am not sure that there will be any visible and personal Messiah in this redemption: the people itself will perhaps be its own Messiah, the people labouring, scourged, crowned with thorns, agonising and dying, to rise again immortal and impassable. For peoples are divine'<sup>16</sup>

This does something very similar to what Nivedita's writing did; it appropriates the imagery of the most sacred religious texts and it makes them contemporary [in the 1900s] and relevant, contorts them, of course, and uses them as the vehicle of national passion.

There were differences. Nivedita was a religious reformer. She was also challenging Hindu orthodoxy, redefining ideas of caste, even the very conception of liberation. 'Caste, and occupation, and mode of living, and forms of culture might all disappear, and Hinduism remain intact as ever.'<sup>17</sup>

Pearse did not try to change the character or Irish Catholicism. Yet Pearse and Nivedita would have understood each other. Both wanted to invigorate a nation. In neither Ireland nor India did their ideas about the oneness of the

spirit and the nation prove to be the roadmap for the future.

Pearse compared himself to Christ and went meekly to his death, as Christ had, but those enthused by his sacrifice to fight on rebuilt an Ireland that found religion to be a cloying restraint and maturity to be a liberation from church control.

And India, as inspired by Vivekananda, Nivedita and, after them, Gandhi, adapted to the modern world despite their warnings.

And both Ireland and India incidentally, tragically, exacerbated their own sectarian divisions with their concentration on religion as a defining national characteristic.

This year Ireland celebrated the centenary of the execution of Patrick Pearse while acknowledging that his dream is unfulfilled, and perhaps better left that way too. But few have recognised that Nivedita was stirred at the same time by the same vision, in India. And that is partly also because ideas about nations having spiritual destinies have proved dangerous in the century since her death.

Nivedita was the same person after her conversion by Swamiji as she was before it. Even after meeting him, her thinking progressed along lines it might have followed had she gone back to Ireland instead of to India. She did not go to India to become a withdrawn contemplative but to be an activist of the type she had already been. Swamiji had recognised in her the energies and inclinations which would make her an eager and useful worker for an emerging independent India. And she had recognised in Swamiji a teacher who would take her further along a road she was already on. Her political energies before she went to India had focussed on the cause of Irish Home Rule, a cause that was demoralised by the Parnell scandal when she was in London. She transferred that interest to the cause of Indian Home Rule. She had been a journalist, writing on politics and education in London and she

would write with ever increasing vigour in India. She had integrated herself into the intellectual elite of her day in London and she found herself in similar society in Bengal.

There is a fuller story yet to be written about this remarkable woman, a biography that comprehends her life before she went to India and recognises that her life in India is continuous with it.



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*Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' School, Kolkata*

## ***An Education for India: In the Footsteps of Sister Nivedita***

**Arpita Mitra**

There is but one imperative duty before us today. It is to help on Education by our very lives if need be. Education in the great sense as well as the little, in the little as well as in the big.<sup>1</sup>

**S**ISTER NIVEDITA'S (1867–1911) contribution to Indian society spans across fields as diverse as education, women's

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empowerment, development of science and fine arts, writing of Indian history, and working for the cause of Indian nationalism. This article is concerned with her contribution in the field of education in India, which was not confined to the establishment of the Ramakrishna School for Girls alone. She also laid down the guidelines for a truly 'national education' in modern India. In that sense, she was one of the pioneers in the development of 'indigenous education'. While



more well-known are the efforts of Rabindranath Tagore—Shantiniketan—and Mahatma Gandhi—*Nai Talim*, Nivedita's efforts in developing a national education for modern times have received little attention in mainstream academic studies. This essay is by no means an exhaustive study; it aims at discussing some key features of her educational thought for India. It is suggestive, rather than comprehensive; and could contribute to facilitate further research and development of policy along the lines suggested.

The 'national education' that she proposed for India had twin aspects: it had to be national, and it had to be nation-making (4.347). In the following passages, we shall consider how she articulated a philosophy of education for India that was both national and nation-making.

# 1

The two things that the introduction of English education did to India was: (1) to alienate Indians from their cultural roots, and thereby kill the organicity and vital force of the culture; and (2) to curb national feelings of Indians by introducing the idea of the superiority of foreign culture and inferiority of indigenous culture. This has been effected to a large extent. From primary education to higher academics, even now we are largely under the spell of non-indigenous normative frameworks and conceptual tools that are fraught with deeply embedded power relations. Nivedita's 150th year would also be the seventieth year of Indian Independence, yet very little has been done to devise a truly 'national education' for India. Notwithstanding pioneering efforts in that direction during colonial period and reports of committees like the one headed by Dr Radhakrishnan in Independent India, with the exception of a few educational experiments, by and large, we are not yet receptive to the idea of a truly indigenous education. Most changes

done in the curriculum to incorporate indigenous elements or perspectives are merely cosmetic. And even for those who would be interested in pursuing this course, there is no clear road map as to its content and implementation.

Then, there are other issues as well. Any indigenous form of education that we conceive for our society today has to take into account the diversity of Indian society and traditions. Let us be clear that by indigenous education, Nivedita did not even for a moment mean a 'Hindu' indigenous education. Hers was the idea of a truly national education that would incorporate the cultural elements that India acquired in all the successive non-Hindu phases of its history as well—Buddhist, Islamic, even British. She could clearly see India, beyond these differences, rather in fact, being shaped and enriched by these differences.

In Nivedita's scheme of things, the secular and the sacred fused in an organic way. This was probably true of many other stalwarts of that generation. However, from what has come to pass ever since, we have grown suspicious of all that has any kind of religious undertone. And in our zeal to secularise everything, we often tend to throw away the baby with the bathwater. This would deprive our children of their cultural rights, and they would grow up poorer in knowledge about different aspects of their own history and culture.

I raise the issue of cultural transmission, precisely because, according to one of the many definitions of education, it is about the transmission of culture to the next generation. In that sense, the British verily devised a system of de-education in India! It is not within the scope of this article to take this issue further, but I would like to briefly note that somewhere we need to balance the need for a secular outlook and that for cultural transmission.

In an age of the growing critique of nationalism and nation-states, many would find the very idea of a 'national' education problematic. Furthermore, in the age of globalisation, at least the urban population of India that has developed mixed values, might even be doubtful regarding the utility of such an education. Finally, we have the issue of poverty and illiteracy still looming large in the country and it is high time we devised, on a priority basis, an education that would sensitize those who are in an advantageous position to do something for those who are not. Any 'national education' that comes in place today—in the 150th year of Sister Nivedita—has to take on board all the above considerations. I would like to argue that Nivedita's educational ideas afford a wealth of insights and possibilities with regard to the above concerns and the moment is especially ripe to mine this wealth.

The first objection that may arise against the proposal for a 'national education' is: Is India a 'nation'? This is a question we have inherited from the colonial times. I have discussed this issue at some length in another article.<sup>2</sup> Here I intend to mention the following. Swami Prajnananda defined a nation as a collective of people occupying a common territory, and united around a common goal for a sufficiently long period of time so as to develop some predominant tendencies, determined by that common goal. He argued that while in the case of Western nations, this common goal was politics, in the case of India, it was spirituality. Prajnananda wrote: 'if one analyses scientifically, it is difficult not to call the civilisational entity that developed in [pre-British] India a 'nation', but it is for sure that such a nation did not develop anywhere else in the world.'<sup>3</sup> Spirituality in this context, however, should not be understood as the development of a particular religion or sect. It is the quest of the human soul for the Eternal, the Transcendental.

So then, what is the pulse of the 'national' in India? As Nivedita put it:

Within this land, Aryan ideals and concepts dominate those of other elements ... In India, the distinctive stock of ideas rises out of her early pre-occupation with great truths. Neither Jain nor Mohammedan admits the authority of the Vedas [...], but both are affected *by the culture derived from them*. Both are marked, as strongly as the Hindu, by a high development of domestic affection, by a delicate range of social observation and criticism and by the conscious admission that the whole of life is to be subordinated to the ethical struggle between inclination and conscience.<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere she remarked:

As regard the *ideal of the soil* we gather from the life of the common people as well as from the *Bhagawat-Gita*, that the ideal is purity. It is difficult to bring out clearly all that is implied in the word Purity. But it may be provisionally defined as learning to regard things and people not as instruments or objects for our enjoyment, but as ends in themselves. Towards this ideal, we must move on. [...] In other words, we must work for work's sake—i.e., for the carrying out of our ideal. And this is possible only when we do not set any unduly high value on this life as an instrument of enjoyment.<sup>5</sup>

Defining the national ideal in these terms helps us avoid lapsing into the danger of defining it in terms of the specific ideals of any one community. This is and can be a universal ideal. It is present in some measure in overt or covert ways in all cultures, although each culture and even each individual works it out in his or her own way. Finally, it is indispensable too, because without it the entire fabric of social life would collapse. One may ask: if it is so universal, what is specifically 'Indian' about it? In a way, the West has also developed this ideal—but worked it out in their own way—their great efforts at collective endeavours, the great sacrifices they embrace

for the sake of the 'nation' are different forms of the expression of the same ideal of forgetting the little self. But India has had a continuous civilisational history of more than 9000 years<sup>6</sup>, during which its people have perfected the different pathways possible for the realization of this ideal. From Rishi Dadhichi of Rig Vedic yore to Swami Vivekananda of our times, we hear the toll of the same bell ringing in different ways: not the world for our sake, but we for the sake of the world.

Finally, is the concept of a 'national education' still relevant in the era of globalisation? Will a 'national education' be a complete education in terms of familiarising the child with the world at

large as well? As to the first question, let us take the example of the Mahabharata. Do we still not find an echo of the dilemmas of our own times in that great saga of India? There is something timeless about the Mahabharata, yet it is so firmly rooted in the Indian soil. As to the second concern, no education is complete without the national as well as the international dimensions. In this respect, 'national education' does not exclude the international and it also does not mean simply knowing about one's own tradition; 'national education' prepares one even to apprehend the truly great in the international. The next section of the essay deals more elaborately with this issue.

*Sister Nivedita with the First Batch of Girl Students*



IMAGE: [HTTP://MAHENDRAJANI.WORDPRESS.COM](http://mahendrajani.wordpress.com)



2

According to Nivedita, pre-modern society in India had evolved a system of 'education of the individual in adaptation to the structure of the community'. This system imparted 'the training which was to enable each man and woman to distribute the life-effort in due proportion between self and the social organism'; and this was a time-tested system.<sup>7</sup> Historian of education, Suresh Chandra Ghosh writes that the pre-British indigenous schools 'had shown wonderful adaptability to local environment and existed for centuries through a variety of economic conditions or political vicissitudes'.<sup>8</sup> There was a wide network of small village schools that were self-sufficient. As per William Adam's *Report of the State of Education in Bengal* (1835), the Bengal and Bihar region itself had almost one lakh schools and these were completely supported by the local community.<sup>9</sup> But with the coming of the British Raj, the indigenous schools showed signs of decay. The gradual destruction of the village crafts and industries and the large-scale impoverishment of the rural population in the wake of economic measures like the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, for instance, were some of the factors responsible for the decay of the indigenous education system. As Sister Nivedita put it: 'like some ancient treasure that could not bear contact with the air, her [India's] own arts and wealth have crumbled to dust and been carried away by that stream.' At the time she was writing, she still found India 'in the first shock of the modern catastrophe, not having yet realized even the elements of the new problem, much less having had time to evolve methods of solution.'<sup>10</sup>

Hence, it is the organic link that the erstwhile education system had with the society that was snapped. But for Nivedita, as for Swami Vivekananda, the new education system that India needed was not to be a mere lapse into the old

format. It cannot be anything regressive, as India as well as the whole world was on the verge of deep movements of change that have unfolded before us in the last and present centuries. The need of the hour, therefore, was to have 'some scheme of education which shall enable the people to conserve all that they have already achieved, while at the same time they adapt themselves to the needs of the new era' (ibid.).

Nivedita articulated the integration of the above two aspects very well in her definition of 'national education'—'a training which has a stronger colour of its own and begins by relating the child to his home and country through all that is familiar, but ends by making him *free of all* that is true, cosmopolitan and universal' (347). She says that a 'national education is, first and foremost, an education in the national idealism' (351), that is, the very specific ideals developed by the nation in question. However, eventually, the aim of education is the 'emancipation of sympathy and intellect' (ibid.) so that the individual can apprehend and appreciate greatness at a universal level, even outside the cultural context of her or his own country. An education that helps the individual arrive at this point would be education in the true sense of the term.

Reiterating the time-honoured pedagogic principle that the child is gradually to be taken from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the known to the unknown, Nivedita said that 'New ideals have to be approached through the old. The unfamiliar has to be reached through the familiar' (350). By new ideals of course she meant the ideals of the modern age and the Western world that India came to know through her contact with Europe.

She expresses beautifully the relationship between the eternal and the contingent, the universal and the local: 'It may indeed be questioned whether there is such a thing as a *new* ideal. There

is an ideal and there is a form through which it is expressed, but when we reach the ideal itself, we have reached the eternal. Here, all humanity is at one. Here, there is neither new nor old, neither own nor foreign' (350-1).

However, as she continues:

Yet the expression 'new ideals' has a certain meaning. European poetry, for instance, glorifies and exalts the betrothed maiden. Indian poetry equally idealises the faithful wife. Both are only customary forms through which is reached the supreme conception, that of holiness in woman. Obviously, however, it would be futile to try to lead the imagination of an Indian child to this ideal, through the characteristically European conception, and equally foolish to try to lead the European child through the prevailing Indian form. Yet, when education has done its perfect work, in the emancipation of the imagination towards great and gracious womanhood, it is clear that there will be an instant apprehension of this ideal, even in new forms (351).

We have an ideal case near at hand—Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. In 1899, during the early phase of her acquaintance with Holy Mother, Nivedita thought about the Holy Mother that 'in *thought*, outside the range of practicality and experience, these ladies have no range; it is in feeling that they are so strong. ... they have never had the education that would enable to frame a thought that would appeal to a stranger.'<sup>11</sup> However, this impression of Nivedita about Holy Mother would evolve and change completely in due course. By 1906-07, she was recording in her *The Master as I saw Him*:

In her, one sees realised that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may attain. And yet, to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood. I have never known her hesitate, in giving utterance to large

and generous judgment, however new or complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer. Her whole experience is of theocratic civilisation. Yet she rises to the height of every situation. ... Does one carry to her some perplexity or mortification born of social developments beyond her ken? With unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter, and sets the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty.<sup>12</sup>

Nivedita goes on to record two incidents that clearly bear evidence to the great universality of the Mother's mind and heart, despite her lack of formal education. On the afternoon of an Easter Day, Nivedita was witness to this aspect of the Holy Mother, when the latter heard about the meaning of the Easter festival and was listening to the Easter songs: 'in the swiftness of her comprehension, and the depth of her sympathy with these resurrection-hymns, unimpeded by any foreignness or unfamiliarity in them, we saw revealed for the first time, one of the most impressive aspects of the great religious culture of Sarada Devi' (107). The same trait came out again on another evening, when the Mother asked Nivedita and others to describe to her a European wedding. They play-acted a scene from a Christian wedding and Nivedita was astonished to see the Mother's reaction: "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health,—till death us do part," were words that drew exclamations of delight from all about us. But none appreciated them as did the Mother. Again and again she had them repeated to her. "Oh the *Dharmmik* words! the righteous words!!" (108). We see that Holy Mother was able to grasp greatness even in foreign form, whereas she was barely literate. Does it then tell us something about the true meaning of education?

'In proportion as we rightly analyse the known, rightly distinguishing even in what is

familiar between the ideal expressed and the form assumed, in that proportion will it open for us the book of the whole world' (4.357). Where then is the place of foreign culture in a true education? It is 'never at the beginning' (355), said Nivedita. Why? Firstly, it is only when one is deeply rooted in the familiar that one can safely take up the unfamiliar, all true education proceeds from the known to the unknown.

Furthermore, as she noted: 'To emancipate the greatest number of people most easily and effectively it is necessary to choose familiar ideals and forms' (351). For example, the American child can learn truthfulness from George Washington, but it makes no sense for the Indian child to do so. The latter would always learn it better from Yudhisthira, and this holds true even today. Nivedita explains: 'There is no such thing in education as a pure idea. Pure ideas are attained by paramahansas. The ideas of the child are inextricably entangled with the things he sees about him, with social institutions, and with his own acts' (355). So is the case with the masses.

Then again, there is another necessity for starting with the familiar—the importance of knowing one's own culture: 'the man who does not love his own, the man who is not clear as to what is his own, will never be received by any people as anything more than half a man' (357).

'But have we no right to seek to extend our modes of feeling and forms of expression?' (356), she asks. And then answers the question with a reference to architecture:

Fergusson points out in his great work that when the architecture of a people is great and living, they are all the better for accepting and assimilating minor elements of foreign origin. It matters very little, he tells us, whether the jewelled mosaics of the Indo-Saracenic style were or were not Italian in their origin, since India made of them something so singular in

its beauty and so peculiarly her own. It is clear however that she could not have done this from the standpoint of an architecture that was itself a vague experiment. Because she knew thoroughly well what she liked, in her own building, therefore she knew what would be a beautiful ornament upon it (356–7).

The organic tradition needs to have a vitality of its own in order that it can assimilate foreign elements positively. Any entity—individual or society—that is firmly established in its own soil, is in a better position to learn from others without risking to lose its own individuality.

However, an emphasis on the indigenous should not become an over-emphasis. Nivedita warns us:

Do not try ... to prove that your ancestors understood all things, but manfully determine to add its mastery to the intellectual realm of your ancestor's descendants. I see this vice on all hands. People imagine that it is 'national' to reply when told something new that ought to thrill them through and through, 'Ah yes, I am familiar with that in Sanskrit or from the *Mahabharata*, or from the sayings of such and such a *Sadhu*.' And there their thought ends. This is pure idleness and irreverence. Such recognition kills thought, and coffins it: it offers it no home in which to dwell, no garden in which to grow! The man who would conquer new realms intellectually must never look back, except to find tools. The man who would see Truth face to face must first wash his eyes in dew, unused by humankind (391–2).

Since a love for the indigenous can lapse into jingoism if not harnessed, it must never be forgotten that the 'familiar is not the goal; knowledge is the goal ... An education that stopped short at the familiar would be a bondage instead of an emancipation ...' 'It must never be forgotten that nationality in culture is the means, not the end. There is a level of achievement where



all the educated persons of the world can meet, understand and enjoy each other's associations. This level is freedom' (352).

### 3

According to Nivedita, the knowledge of Indian Geography and History should occupy a special place in the education of the Indian child. '[I]t has long, I think, been determined amongst us that India's assimilation of the modern spirit may be divided into three elements, which She has not only to grasp but also to democratise. These are: Modern Science; Indian History; and the World-Sense or Geography—Synthetic Geography' (391).

It was in the light of Geography and History, that Nivedita sought to (re-)interpret Indian culture (as against the Indian history and culture projected by the British for their selfish motives). A particularly important intellectual influence in her life in this regard was the Scottish sociologist, biologist, and town-planner, Sir Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), whom she had known since 1900.<sup>13</sup> In order to be able to learn from his methods, she joined him as his secretary for the Congress of the History of Religions in Paris that year. There were at least two areas in which their interests and work converged: one was in a developing the 'Sociological Method in History', and the other was education.

With regard to the first domain, she once wrote: 'Prof Geddes gave me a tool beyond all price.'<sup>14</sup> This 'tool' was primarily the framework to understand the evolution of society in relation to its immediate environment. It sought to map the interaction between place, work, and folk in order to arrive at an understanding of the historical evolution of a particular society. This involved a confluence of disciplines like geography (place), economics (work) and anthropology (folk). And Geddes himself developed this method while drawing insights from the French

sociologist Frédéric Le Play's (1806–1882) work on the family.

Le Play is believed to be the pioneer of the field work and case-study methods in the French sociological tradition.<sup>15</sup> According to Le Play, the basic units of socio-geographic research were Place, Work, and Family. Place denoted the physical environment that determined the occupational work that prevailed in that area; while Work determined the family life; and Family was the fundamental unit of society. Geddes adapted Le Play's triad and made it into Place, Work and Folk, which he even denoted as Environment, Function, and Organism respectively. His interest was in mapping the interaction between the environment and the organism, without, however, foregrounding either of the two.

Deriving from this interaction, he arrived at his theory of the 'Valley Section', which was a hypothetical cross-section of the river valley, the quintessential natural region that gave birth of great civilizations. The Valley Section served as a model to explain the rise of 'Primitive Occupations' as a result of geographical relief. The resultant occupations and corresponding settlement types of the Valley Section were: 'the Miner, the Woodman, and the Hunter on the heights; the Shepherd on the grassy slopes; the poor Peasant (of oats or rye) on the lower slopes; and the rich Peasant (with wheat, and in south it may be wine and oil) on the plain; finally, the Fisher (sailor, merchant, etc.) at sea-level.'<sup>16</sup>

These different occupational groups lived in villages and each of them had their own distinct family structure and folk culture which was determined by the place they lived in as well as the work they did. Each of these groups finally contributed to the making of urban civilization. When the cities emerged, these groups, which had earlier lived in relative isolation, came in contact. According to Geddes, this led to a

transformation in occupations: the miner became a blacksmith or toolmaker; the hunter a sportsman and warrior chief; the woodman a builder or civil engineer; the shepherd a spiritual mentor, caravan leader and finally 'railway baron'; the farmer a manager in banking or insurance, or a great agriculturalist and Politician; and finally, the fisherman a merchant-adventurer, emigrant, pirate or mariner. This is the pattern of the rise of occupation in conjunction with the growth of cities, according to Geddes.

The interplay of geography and history and the sociological method in history are both clear from this outline. While Geddes developed this framework, it was Nivedita's calling to apply this and other models conceived by him to understand and write the history of India. And in this effort, she was a pioneer. Geddes hardly had any time or rest in his life to commit his ideas to paper, but he always sought out disciples who could carry out his ideas into concrete projects. He once said about himself: 'I am like the cuckoo bird that lays her eggs in other birds' nests. The main thing is that the egg should develop—not that the cuckoo's ego should be gratified.'<sup>17</sup> With Nivedita, not only did the eggs develop, but the birdlings had a distinct character of their own—the foster bird left an ineluctable mark of her own.

While requesting a paid article from Geddes on a regular basis for a magazine, Nivedita wrote to him:

I want some of your *big thoughts* brought before the Indian people. I wish it might do for them as a whole what it seems to have done for me—make them able to think of the synthesis of the national life!

The sequence of Place—Ideals—Place, I want *badly*. The sequence or web of Education as School—University—Research—Society, I want. The nature of the historical process, I want *badly*.

What constitutes Europe? I want {Greece—Rome—Church} *badly*. Positivism and its main lines of thought-structure, I want.<sup>18</sup>

In 1903, Nivedita wrote to Patrick Geddes' wife, Anna Geddes: 'There is dynamite in the little check-folded paper about Place—Occupation—Family etc. I teach it wherever I go. I fear I have not myself assimilated it as I ought. Yet even as much as I really understand is tremendous.'<sup>19</sup>

The all-consuming engagement of Nivedita's life was India. Hence, for her, all the problems of her day had to be dealt with on a national scale, and the problem of problems was the achievement of nationality itself.<sup>20</sup> Let us see how she applied Geddes' theories for national purposes—for the retrieval of national history, for the awakening of national consciousness, and for preparing the people of India for the national cause.

In her essay 'The History of Man as determined by Place', Nivedita presented Geddes' theory of the rise of occupations in a way so as to enable us to understand the factors that give birth to a civic consciousness superseding family bonds. She explained:

Two types of empire have occurred within the last two thousand years : one the creation of the fisher-peoples of the European coast-line, the other of the tribesmen of Central Asia and Arabia. ... A strong sense of unity precedes aggression, and the sense of unity is made effective through internal definition and self-organisation. Such organisation is obviously easy to gain by the conquest of the sea, where captain, first mate, and second mate will be a father, with his eldest son and second son, and where the slightest dereliction from military discipline on the part of one may involve instant peril of death to all. Thus the family gives place, in the imagination, to the crew, as the organised unit of the human fabric, and the love of hearthside and brood becomes exalted into that civic passion

which can offer up its seven sons and yet say with firm voice, 'Sweet and seemly is it to die for one's country' (4.2).

A similar rise of civic consciousness is witnessed in the second type of empire—that of the Arabs. Nivedita hailed Mohammed, the Prophet of God as the greatest 'nation-maker' of all times. She wrote that the earliest Arab associations were inwoven with the conception of the tribe as a civic unity, transcending the unit of family, and that the necessity of frontier-tribal relationships and courtesies necessarily involved the idea of national inclusiveness and created the basis for a national life. The foundation of the thrones of Baghdad, Constantinople, and Cordova were laid precisely on these elements. Nivedita thus showed 'examples of the educational value of tribal and pastoral life in preparing communities for the organisation of nations and empires' (4.3). She exhorted Indians to draw from these their own lessons in national organisation: 'Even the results of a peculiar occupational education may be appropriated by others, through the intellect alone. ... This is the value of science, that it analyses a fact, displays the secret of power, and enables man to formulate new methods for arriving at the old result' (*ibid.*).

How she connected all knowledge with the idea of serving India! How every thought of hers was truly given to India!

The men who unite, with the energy of the thunderbolt [symbolic of unselfishness], for the attainment of the common goal of heart and conscience, must be men accustomed to combined action and sustained co-operation; men who know the grounds of their faith in one another; men who are familiar with certain outstanding principles: of conduct, and constantly dominated by them. Such character, such experience, is built up for the service of the nation by social forms like those of tribe and crew and lion-hunt. The requisite discipline is

conferred by the necessity of obedience on peril of death. The large outlook and due combination of readiness for war with love of peace are created by lifelong considerations of the common good ... And all these results have been produced on mankind, unsought, by its history and its environment (4.4).

Who else but Nivedita would have thought along these lines and worked out the application of some remote theories formulated by European sociologists to the national cause in India!

Nivedita made extensive and intensive use of 'the Le Play-Geddes doctrine of the influence of place on Humanity'. In one of her works, she referred to a particular lecture by Geddes which she had heard in New York; it represented only one of the forms of Geddes' 'sequences', and she said she never heard it repeated. She explained that sequence, and drew connections for India in her inimitable way:

[Geddes] regarded the growth of the city as falling into historical strata, as it were, which afterward remained piled one upon another, in a mingling of real sequence and apparent confusion. The lecture was illustrated by a black-board drawing of a sort of lotus, divided into numbered whorls and Paris was shown to include (a) an ancient, (b) a medieval and (c) a modern city. The last-named again, was, if my memory serves, divided into (1) Revolution, (2) the Empire, (3) the Financial, and (4) the incipient Cities. It was, in fact, this last classification which I found so rich in suggestion ... For the incipient City will be always what we make it.

Here, it appeared to me, was a most fruitful method of thought. If we would see how fruitful, we might bring it to bear for a moment on the city of Calcutta. Here we have (1) the Hindu (2) the Mussalman (3) the British and (4) a possible, shall we say civic or nationalised city. In each of the three first we have a series of institutions and developments peculiar to it, and in the fourth, what we are pleased to create for it! ...



Or we might take up the history of India. How much more clearly we can think of it, in the light of such a method. First, then, the religious government of caste and Dharma [Hinduism]; second, religious government through the influence of a religious order preaching the spiritual and intellectual equality of all castes [Buddhism]; thirdly, the military domination of still another religious idea, the fraternity of Islam; fourthly, the imposition of a great secularity [the British period] [...]; and, finally, the emergence of the India of the future, in whose cities the mutual relation of these various ideas may be expressed by placing temples, mosques, monasteries, and churches indiscriminately on the circumference of the circle, and Civic Hall, the National hearth, unravelled at the centre (5.58–9).

How beautiful, this synthetic vision of a future India!

Nivedita also delineated an important road map for applying the above sequence in understanding the historical web of cities. This is an important way of retrieving our lost history in a holistic way. She continued: ‘taught by the same semi-geological method, we may take up Indian Geography, and watch it fall into its proper sequence of strata. First, then, we may peel off Calcutta, Madras and Bombay [...] Having done this we stand in an earlier epoch, of which Murshidabad, Poona and Amritsar may, perhaps, be regarded as the most characteristic names in Northern India’ (5.59). The history of Indian cities is important because that will help us know about the great Indian cities of the past that made up what Nivedita called ‘the Indian idea of India’ (4.123). Nivedita herself tried to extricate this layered, web-like histories of cities in her pioneering essays on the Buddhist cities, tracing the rise and fall of cities, as one port of eminence gave way to another, the abbey of an age gave way to the university of the next, and as

an abbey developed in relation to a city of eminence and a state of patronage.<sup>21</sup>

She also drew heavily from Geddes’ vision of synthesis. She wrote to Anna Geddes:

The History of India as an organic unity is slowly revealing itself to me. The future of India as *Synthesis*, the very heart of Asia—receiving and reconciling alike Mongolian, Arab, and Persian, Buddhist, Moslem, and Christian—is also dawning. One of our monks [Swami Sadananda], a Swami who travels with me is mad over this word ‘Synthesis’—he loves it so much, and broods over it so deeply. I cannot help thinking that here in the East Mr. Geddes would be understood in a way, and with a devotion he has never dreamt of.<sup>22</sup>

And she wrote to Geddes himself: ‘I think perhaps the new age is to be dominated by this idea of synthesis ... : It is not this thing or that thing that is not good—It is the all-together. I have seen this so clearly for India. Not one creed

Mrs Anna and Sir Patrick Geddes



or another—not one race, or idea, or state, but the all of them.<sup>23</sup>

In her seminal essay ‘The History of India and its Study’, Nivedita wrote:

India is and always has been a synthesis. No amount of analysis, racial, lingual, or territorial, will ever amount in the sum to the study of India. ... all the parts of a whole are not equal to the whole. ... apart from and above, all the fragments which must be added together to make India, we have to recognize India herself, all-containing, all-dominating, moulding and shaping the destinies and the very nature of the elements out of which she is composed. The Indian people may be defective in the methods of mechanical organisation, but they have been lacking, as a people, in none of the essentials of organic synthesis.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, India is not merely a mechanical sum of her parts—such an entity would hardly be cohesive. The compound that is created out of the combination of these parts has distinctive traits of its own that makes it impossible for us to reduce it to a mere sum of the parts. It might be worthwhile to note that, in a way, this idea is in line with the theory of emergence that claims that the whole exhibits its properties that are different from the individual properties of the parts that constitute the whole.

Nivedita applied the same model of synthesis as well as sequence to understand the history of Hinduism. In her essays on Elephanta and the

Northern Pilgrimage of the Himalayas, she tried to trace the sequence by which diverse elements were absorbed into the corpus of Hinduism to give birth to a synthesis—that was a unity in spite of its diversity. Her efforts at highlighting the synthesis that is India or Hinduism are especially important in the light of the British claims that, given the diversity, India was hardly one nation and Hinduism was hardly one religion. It is important to understand that diversity need not necessarily mean fragmentation. It is in the light of this idea of synthesis that the history (and even the future) of India is to be understood.

And all this (re-)writing of Indian History is to be reflected in the education system. Hence, the proposal for a University and Nivedita's request to Geddes to give her the outline of the sequence of education:

Could you draw up a scheme for placing the study of which I speak in its true place in Primary Education and also in Higher Research?

If you were an Indian prince, with immense revenues at your disposal, if you wanted to make an Indian University possible, two generations hence, what preparations would you make in this matter? What books would you put into your scheme? And what books would you order to be translated? If you had no time to write a book, would you at least be prepared to make a *syllabus* of the study of which I speak which dint of questions and authorities would enable me to help someone or other to struggle into the necessary knowledge?<sup>25</sup>

Around the turn of the century came up the proposal for the ‘Tata Scheme’—Jamsetji Tata announced in 1898 that he wished to set up an Indian post-graduate university for the cultivation of science. The story is well-known how this was a direct result of Jamsetji's acquaintance with Swami Vivekananda. It finally took shape into the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore despite the fact that the British



(from Viceroy Lord Curzon to Sir George Birdwood of the Education Department) did everything to sabotage the proposal. Nivedita went to great lengths—from meeting influential people to writing in newspapers to raising international appeal—to secure favour for the scheme, for a dream so dear to Swamiji—to see India economically and industrially self-sufficient and scientifically advanced.<sup>26</sup> Jamsetji's Secretary had in fact fought with British officials to see that Geddes be appointed as the Principal of the Institute. It was for this proposed university that Geddes suggested the subject 'The Origins of India' for a study and Nivedita requested him to draw up the scheme for such a study and even print it as an article.<sup>27</sup>

What really appealed to Sister Nivedita in the works of Patrick Geddes was the potential she saw in it to help the Indian cause. She wrote to him in 1905:

'What is a Nation?  
If India is to be a nation, what is necessary?  
Influence of this theory on Primary Education.  
Influence of this theory on Post Graduate  
Education.  
What do you say to this?' (476).

With this, we come back to the cycle of education and the task of nation-making. By nation-making she understood both the realization of the fact of being a nation, as well as the literal creation of national feelings and civic consciousness that consolidates a nation. This may not be equated with constructing something new where nothing exists, for one cannot construct anything out of nothing! It is a realization of the cohesion of that which already exists and consolidating it further by action based upon that realization.

As a completely self-effacing conduit, she declared: 'Not one lecture can I give without blessing the methods of observation that Mr. Geddes

has put into my hands. If a Young India arises, to bring about a national rebirth, we shall owe it more to him than either he or we shall ever wholly know.'<sup>28</sup> Attributing all credit to Geddes, she wrote: 'in my own case you illumined, not what you pointed out to me, but that India which you had never seen.'<sup>29</sup> But after all, it was her eyes that saw, albeit with the help of the light Geddes' work shed on Indian history.

One may ask here: how legitimate would it be to apply methods developed by 'foreigners' using sample data from 'foreign' cases to help the cause of a 'national' history or education? My observation is that Nivedita used Geddes' methods only inasmuch as they were in consonance with the specificity of the Indian situation (and there was quite a deep consonance between Geddes' theories and the Indian situation). Secondly, she used only Geddes' methods, and there was hardly any trace of ideologically informed concepts with an implicit notion of the inferiority of non-Western societies. Lastly, Nivedita's contribution to the writing of Indian history and the development of nationalism might itself be taken as a quintessential point of fusion between the 'foreign' and the 'national', and she herself admits it at times.

#### 4

Now, we move on to a different aspect of education. According to Nivedita, our conception of education 'must take note of the child as a whole, as heart as well as mind, will as well as mind and heart. Unless we train the *feelings* and the *choice*, our man is not educated.'<sup>30</sup> This is one of her central propositions regarding the development of an ideal education system. It calls for a close analysis.

She underscored the importance of equally developing all the three distinct faculties of thought (which she denoted by 'mind'), feelings



(denoted by ‘heart’) and will in an ideal education. The ‘will’ here does not mean merely will-power in the sense of determination, but largely the positive and moral will, that is, the determination to do the right thing at the right moment notwithstanding adverse conditions. We do talk of education today as the development of ‘mental, moral and physical powers’ of the child, but presently we have included these elements in the curriculum in a rather superficial manner. I shall try to arrive at a model for the development of these faculties with the help of the Vedantic concept of the body as consisting of *pancha kosha* or ‘five sheaths’. Nivedita had not invoked this concept explicitly; but the opinion of the present author is that her ideas can be elaborated and developed further with the help of this Vedantic concept. I shall first explain the concept and then come back to the concordance between this model and Nivedita’s ideas.

In our present education system, we operate with a normative framework that treats the child as a mind-body complex and gives paramount importance to the mind—and especially to its intellect function. We do talk about the need to develop compassion, fellow-feeling and love in the child, but we do not seem to have developed adequate wherewithal to go about it. I would like to argue that if we adopt in our education system an understanding of the human personality based on the *pancha kosha* model, we would be in a better position to actualize the need for developing compassion—something that Nivedita emphasized repeatedly.

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* famously declared the nature of the human entity as the atman or Self covered by five non-selves, appearing as selves.<sup>31</sup> *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.1.1 states that humans are the product of the essence of food. Hence, food is the self. The next verse establishes the all-pervasiveness of food, and then

counters the previous impression of food being our self by saying that there is another inner self—the vital force or breath (*prana*). Then is established the all-pervasiveness of the vital force, but subsequently it is declared that there is yet another inner self—the mind (2.3.1). Upon reflection, it is further articulated that the yet inner self, as compared to the mental self, is constituted by right knowledge, that is, *vijnana* (2.4.1). Finally, after declaring the qualities of *vijnana*, verse 2.5.1 tells us about the self, constituted by bliss, that is even interior to the layer constituted by *vijnana*.

The Upanishad does not use the term ‘kosha’; it uses the word ‘atma’, meaning self, for each of these layers of *anna*, *prana*, *mana*, *vijnana*, and *ananda*. But as upon reflection each layer is eliminated from the status of being our true self, the use of the term ‘atma’ is dropped as a designation for that layer. The commentators on the Upanishad use the word ‘kosha’ to distinguish these layers of the gross and fine bodies from atman, our real Self. From here, we derive that the atman is successively covered from the inside out by the *anandamaya*, *vijnanamaya*, *manomaya*, *pranamaya*, and *annamaya koshas*. The same knowledge is repeated in the next chapter, 3.1.1–6.1, where Bhṛigu acquires this knowledge under the guidance of his father Varuna.

Now, let us engage with the concept of the *pancha kosha* closely. The *annamaya kosha* or the gross body is the outermost layer. When we think of our identity, we usually think of it first in terms of our body and other attributes associated with the body. But upon a little reflection, it would be evident that our real self is not the body, but the one who inhabits the body. Now, who inhabits the body?

After the *annamaya kosha*, comes the *pranamaya kosha*. The gross body dies, when *prana* or vital force is snapped. Next, we come to the

*manomaya* kosha. It is important to remember that while the atman is non-body, that is, spirit, all the five sheaths are bodies, that is, matter. The *annamaya* kosha is the gross body, while the *manomaya* kosha, that is, the mind, is fine body. This would take a modern reader aback, as we are used to thinking of the mind as non-body or not material. According to Vedanta, that is clearly not the case. Furthermore, in the Vedantic framework, this *manomaya* kosha comprises both the faculty of intellect as well as that of emotions. Once again, in common parlance, we usually associate the mind predominantly with the intellect and rationality, while we speak of emotions as pertaining more to the domain of the 'heart'. It is important to take note of these two distinctions of the Vedantic concept of the mind in contrast to our common-sensical view of the mind—(a) that the mind is matter, hence finite; and (b) emotions belong to the domain of the mental, hence, are material and finite too.

Here, we need to make some more distinctions—the distinction between thought and feeling on the one hand, and between emotion and feeling on the other. For the sake of clarity and in order to avoid confusion, I am using these words to denote specific things that are distinct from each other. It may not be difficult to understand the difference between thought and feeling, but in our daily lives, we usually conflate emotions and feelings. By emotions, is meant reactions like attraction, repulsion, hatred, fear, and jealousy. These are reactions, because they are essentially the result of our attachment to persons and objects. In this sense, 'love' is not an emotion; it can be categorised as feeling. It would be an irony to use the expression 'true love', as if there could be 'false love'! However, for the sake of convenience, I am referring to 'true love' when I say that love

is not an emotion. We all have our individual definitions of love, and our love is usually as subjective as our definitions of it! But here I am referring to love as avatars and saints have experienced it—an almost self-effacing love for the divine as well as a feeling of compassion for all of humanity. There is a transcendental, universal as well as spontaneous and sufficient-unto-itself quality about this love—it is not conditioned by anything.

It is important to note that the mind, when it is yet to be purified by sadhana, is not the seat of such an experience of love; it is not the seat of spiritual experiences like deep ecstatic feelings for the divine, visions and different kinds of spiritual bhavas or moods, which are categorically distinct in nature from our ordinary emotions. The mind, when controlled and purified, aids in the process of spiritual experiences, but it is not the final instrument of God-realisation.

Now, we come to the *vijnanamaya* kosha which would be a little difficult to define, as it cannot be defined with the help of concepts that lie outside the Vedantic episteme. *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.4.1 says that *shraddha* is the head of the layer called *vijnana*; *rita* is its right side and *satya* its left side; yoga is its self and *mahat* is its stabilizing tail. This sheath is often referred to as '*buddhi*', but not in the sense of ordinary intelligence. It is a higher intelligence. Some refer to it as the 'intellectual sheath' in English. It is important to remember that this is not the same as the intellect pertaining to the *manomaya* kosha; the *vijnanamaya* kosha is a higher form of intellect that can discriminate between what is righteous and what is not.

Next comes the *anandamaya* kosha, which has been defined as the seat of bliss (2.5.1). This is the layer nearest to the atman. This is the seat of all true feelings—of compassion and universal love. Any thought conjoined with feeling for

others as well as any will established in the absolute good proceed from this seat—which has been called the ‘heart’ by saints. When Swamiji had asked to choose what the heart says when faced with a dilemma between the head and the heart, to my mind, he meant dry rationality by ‘head’, and by ‘heart’, he did not mean the seat of emotions, but that of genuine feeling. He did not mean any kind of emotionalism. When Krishna says he dwells in the heart of all, he means this seat of true feelings.

I would like to suggest that unless we have this Vedantic framework at the back of our analysis, we would not fully comprehend the implications of Nivedita’s repeated emphasis on the development of the heart and the training of feelings in the child. The development of the mind is undoubtedly necessary and we already know by now how central it is to education. But now, we need to attend to the development of the heart as never before. ‘Remember that Truth in its fullness is revealed, not only through the intellect but also through the heart and the will. Never rest content, therefore, with a realization which is purely mental.’<sup>32</sup> And as she put it: ‘Even an ignorant mother by teaching her boy to love and to act on his love can be the finest of educators’ (4.345). But the point for us is to be able to distinguish between love and what I called emotions in the above passages. And it should be noted that Nivedita added the need to act on one’s love.

Nivedita emphasized the need for the harmonious development of thought, feelings, and will. It is really an inseparable complex—all righteous thought and moral action are supported by true feelings. And true feeling, true thought, true will—all proceed from the pure heart.

The development of the positive will in the child—the impetus and power to act rightly in any given situation—is an important part

of education. Swamiji once defined ‘true education’ as ‘a development of faculty, [...] a training of individuals to will rightly and efficiently.’<sup>33</sup> And Nivedita pointed out: ‘To feel nobly and to choose loftily and honestly is a thousandfold more important to the development of faculty than any other single aspect of the educational process. The lad in whom this power is really present and really dominant, will always do the best thing possible under any given circumstances.’<sup>34</sup>

Following the path shown by Swamiji, Nivedita also defined the ‘real religion’ of our times as consisting of ‘the desire to serve, the longing to better conditions, to advance our fellows, to lift the whole’ (4.346), and everything else as doctrine, opinion, theory (ibid.). And this—the desire to serve, to lift the whole—is also the real education of our day. “No man liveth to himself alone.” In proportion as we realise this, can be the greatness of our living. In proportion as it is our motive, will be the reality of our education’ (ibid.).

The development of this quality—the fact of being for the sake of the world (sacrifice), and not seeing the world as being for our sake (enjoyment)—is related to the very aim of education. What is the purpose of education—money-making? True, one needs money to survive, but we forget—when the man is made, he will make money too, if required. But if our man is not made, the whole educational effort is futile. Nivedita defined the purpose of education as ‘the development of the child for the good, not of himself, but of *jana-desha-dharma* or, as the western would phrase it, the development of the individual for the benefit of the environment. [...] There is no fear of weakness and selfishness for one whose whole training has been formed round this nucleus’ (ibid.).

The development of this faculty through real



education is intimately connected with the task of nation-building: 'Hunger for the good of others as an end in itself, the infinite pity that wakes in the heart of an Avatara, at sight of the suffering of humanity, these are the seed and root of nation-making' (4.348).

## 5

We might go back here to the examples of the European and Arab empires—how, because of the influence of their environment, they could transcend family ties and conceive of themselves as a civic entity. The development of the civic ideal—as a progression beyond the family ideal—and the capacity to work *together* for the national cause, are the processes and factors that a 'national education' in India should foster.

A 'national education' is not merely education along national lines, but it should also aid the development of national feelings. Nivedita defined national feelings as, above all, 'feeling for others'. Rooted in public spirit and in a strong civic sense, it was, for her, in essence 'organized unselfishness'. She defined public spirit as 'the expression of that character which is born of constantly placing the ego, with the same intensity as in the family, in a more complex group' (4.213). And it is actually the family itself which can achieve this goal of substituting the primacy of the family by the primacy of the civic and national unit: 'The best preparation for nation-making that a child can receive is to see his elders always eager to consider the general good rather than their own' (4.347–8). 'We must surround our children with the thought of their nation and their country. The centre of gravity must lie, for them, outside the family' (4.348).

She felt that while India had developed the family ideal par excellence, Indians now needed to shift their focus to the civic ideal. 'The



problem of the age, for India, as we have constantly insisted, is to supersede the family, as a motive, and even as a form of consciousness, by the *civitas*, the civic and national unity' (5.221). And women have a special role to play in this. This goal cannot be achieved 'by men, as men, alone. It is still more necessary that it should be done by women' (*ibid.*). By virtue of being mother and wife, women wield a far greater influence in moral and personal life. But Nivedita did not restrict the role of women as merely mothers and wives in the propagation of the civic ideal. Citing the examples of women rulers and administrators in India, she cautioned that while in the case of the Western woman, the civic personality is relatively well-developed, it is not that the East, and India in particular, is lacking in such examples in its history (4.240–1).

Instilling the national fervour in women in those days, meant for her, not only the regeneration of the nation, but also the rejuvenation of women themselves: 'Daily the life of our Indian

womanhood is shrinking. Day by day, their scope is being lessened. Unless we can capture for them the new world of expression, they will steadily continue to lose more and more of the world they had. If Sita and Savitri are ever to be born of Indian mothers, we must create new types for them, suited to the requirements of the modern age' (5.223).

While the development of the civic spirit is a virtue in which the West excels, there is no harm in learning from the West on this count. And Nivedita unveiled the spiritual dimension of this so-called secular virtue, when she said: 'In concentrating the German mind on the German problem, Europe makes a hero out of many a common man. This also is a form of realisation' (4.337). And from a purely practical viewpoint too, 'the superiority of the West lies in her realisation of the value of great united efforts in any given direction ... India may, all things considered, be capable of producing a greater number of geniuses, per thousand of her population, than Germany : but Germany has known how to bring the German mind to bear on the German problem ! That is to say, she has organised the common, popular mind' (4.335). And this is a lesson yet to be learnt by Indians!

## 6

By way of conclusion, it may be said that Nivedita developed a philosophy of education that was at once broad and intensive. On the one hand, she wrote that while in the West, it was mandatory to enlist for military service for a few years after completion of education, it should also be that an Indian student, upon completion of education, be called upon to join the 'army of education' so to speak (4.331). That is, to solve the extensive problem of lack of education in the country, each graduate student would devote three exclusive years of their lives

in educating the masses. 'It takes thirty years to make a whole people literate, even supposing that an idea like this were carried out in its fullness' (ibid.). Where are we seventy years after Independence? She also pointed out: 'No central organisation could arrange a scheme like this. Only by a common impulse of the people and the students themselves could it be made a reality. But it is not impossible ... all depends upon the number of lives that can be laid upon its altar. ... Without men's lives, no seed of the mind germinates. How many will give up comfort, place, opportunity, ease, even perhaps their whole life, for this, the elementary education of the Indian people?' (4.331-2).

On the other hand, she captured the deepest and finest nuances of an effective education. One of the distinct elements of a perfect education, according to Nivedita, was the following: 'if we would obtain from a human mind the highest possible return, we must recognize in its education the stage of preparing it to learn, of training it to receive impressions, of developing it intensively, as it were, independently of the particular branch of knowledge through which this is done. Of the very existence of this phase of the educational process, many are unaware' (4.338).

I would like to conclude on the note that at a very fine level, education means the development of a mind that would be ready to receive when the fundamental answers to its fundamental quest comes, a mind that would be ready to embrace that one absorbing idea, that passion of its life, when it finally encounters it, no matter in which form (art, science, history, spirituality, crafts, industry, business) the answer or the idea comes. 'A nation stands or falls in the long run by the number of such souls that she is capable of producing, out of the rank and file of ordinary education' (4.342).



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# ***A Dedicated Sister and the Three Great Sons of Mother India***

**Dr Saroj Upadhyay and Mrs Sudeshna Gupta**

**T**HE ARDENT DISCIPLE OF Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita (1867–1911) was regarded as versatile genius with her contribution and creation of the ‘idea of India’.<sup>1</sup> Swamiji’s words full with wisdom derived from Upanishads, Gita, and Vedas, and his illustrious guru Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa entered into Nivedita’s mind. From Vivekananda, Nivedita had learned the treasures of Indian culture, spirituality, and glorious tradition. She became deeply engrossed with Indian philosophy and value system, and felt the gravity of the message of the soul of India with a profound and deep seated insight. Sister Nivedita became a champion of the traditions and culture of this country which enabled her to participate in the struggle of freedom and keeping in touch with the prominent people such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sir J C Bose, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Abanindranath Tagore, and many others. She was not only an admirer of these great talents but also became their friends inspiring them to excel in their endeavours. In this essay we will give a brief account of Sister’s unfailing friendliness and illustrious cooperation with Sir J C Bose, Shri Rabindranath Tagore, and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh.

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## **J C Bose**

Sister Nivedita met Sir J C Bose and his family in Calcutta in 1898. Nivedita discussed her plan with Mrs Bose about working with the Indian women. Mrs Bose was not hopeful about her success but when she met Nivedita after few months she was surprised to see the school had started working. Mrs Bose was overwhelmed at Nivedita’s will-power and organising ability. The acquaintance between Mrs Bose and Sister Nivedita grew into friendship and Nivedita was often invited by Mrs Bose and other Brahmo ladies to talk upon subjects like Educational methods.

Swamiji left for the West for a second time in June 1899 accompanied by Sister Nivedita and Swami Turiyananda. In 1900 he went to Paris for the Congress of Religion. Both Swamiji and Sister Nivedita were at that time in Paris where Sir J C Bose was invited to the International Congress of Physics that was organized at the Paris Exhibition where he read his famous paper, ‘*Response of Inorganic and Living Matter*’. Swamiji and Nivedita attended the Congress and were full of appreciation for the first scientist of India. Swamiji wrote eloquently about Sir J C Bose in a letter.

Both Swamiji and Sister Nivedita had mutual admiration for J C Bose. After Swamiji’s demise Sir J C Bose wrote in a letter to Sister Nivedita on 9 July 1902:

What a void this makes! What great things were accomplished in these few years! How one man could have done it all! And how all

is stilled now. And yet, when one is tired and weary, it is best that he should rest. I seem to see him [Swami Vivekananda] just as I saw him in Paris two years ago ... the strong man with the large hope, everything large about him.

I cannot tell you what a great sadness has come. I wish we could see beyond it. Our thoughts in India with those who are suffering.<sup>2</sup>

And on the previous day he wrote to Mrs Ole Bull:

It seems to me that nothing is lost and all the great thoughts and work and service and hope remain embodied in and about the place which gave them birth. All our life is but an echo of a few great moments, an echo which reverberates through all time ... That great soul [of Swami Vivekananda] is released; his heroic deeds on this earth are over. Can we realise what that work has been—how one man did all this? When one is tired it is best that he should sleep, but his deeds and teachings will walk the earth and waken and strengthen (ibid.).

Dr Bose fell sick in December 1900 and got operated. He was invited to live in the house of Nivedita's mother in Wimbledon till recovery. Nivedita stood by him in all his struggles against a group of British scientists. She understood that potentialities of Indian intelligentsia were not allowed to take a concrete shape by the British. With regret she wrote: 'Oh! India! India! Who shall undo this awful doing of my nation to you? Who shall atone for *one* of the million bitter insults showered daily on the bravest and keenest, nerved and best of all your sons?' (1.435).

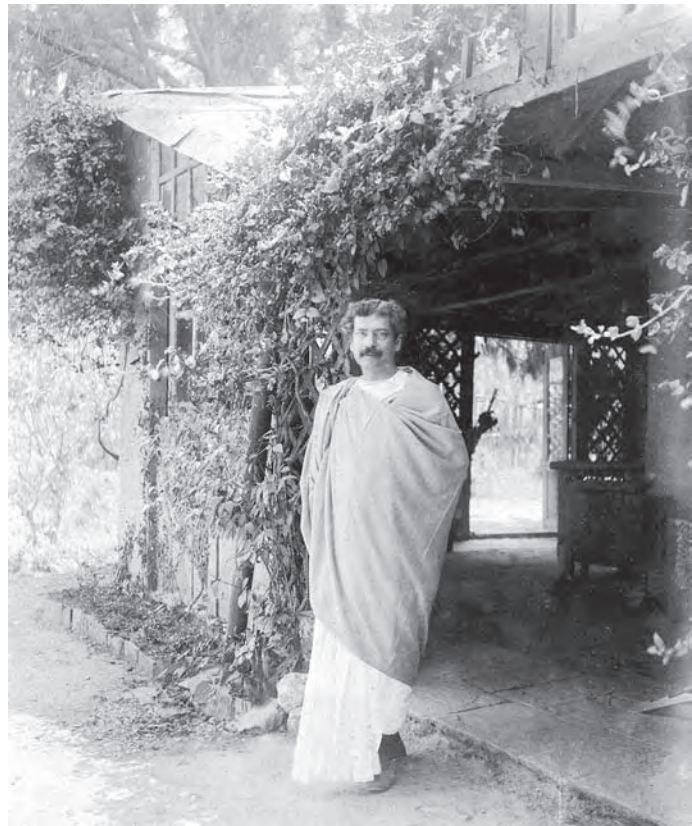
Nivedita engrossed herself in revising and editing Dr Bose's written work from the year 1902. She provided her full support in writing the following books: *Living and Non-Living*, *Plant response and Comparative Electro-Physiology*. His book *Irritability of Plants* was also completed through her cooperation. She provided her help in revising miscellaneous papers

that were regularly published in the *Philosophical Transaction*, journal in the Royal Society.

Nivedita not only inspired him in writing books but also arranged financial help for their publication. Nivedita encouraged establishing a research institute of science which would provide a platform to the Indian Scientists to continue their scientific research in an uninterrupted manner. Unfortunately she was not there to see the formation of the institute which came into existence in the year 1917 six years after her death. Sir J C Bose in his inaugural speech mentioned with lot of gratitude to the Sister, 'In all my struggling efforts, I have not been altogether solitary; while the world doubted, there have been a few, now in the City of Silence, who never wavered in there trust.'<sup>3</sup>

Nivedita spent most of her holiday with the Boses either in India or outside, Calcutta or at different hill stations since 1902. Mrs Bose and his sister, Labanyaprabha Bose, provided their help to Nivedita by teaching in her school for a period of time. She had given him the title of

*Dr Jagadish Chandra Bose at Advaita Ashrama, Mayavati*



‘The Man of Science’ and often referred to him as ‘Bairn’ for, in moods of dejection or defeat, he came to her to revive his cheer and courage.

The last birthday wish of the Sister to Dr Bose from Geneva in 1910 was awe inspiring, she wrote:

When you receive this it will be our beloved 30th, the birthday of birthdays.

May it be infinitely blessed—and may it be followed by many many of ever-increasing sweetness and blessedness! Outside there is the great statue of Christopher Columbus and under his name only the words ‘La Patrie’ and I thought of the day to come when *such words* will be the speaking silence under your name. How spiritually you are already reckoned with him and all those other great adventurers who have sailed trackless seas to bring their people good.

Be ever victorious! Be a light unto the people and a lamp unto their feet! And be filled with peace! You the great spiritual mariner who have found new worlds!<sup>4</sup>

The long and fruitful friendship continued till Nivedita’s breathed her last in 1911. Her early death was a great personal loss to him and for a long time he could not reconcile himself with the fact that Nivedita was no longer there to inspire and encourage him.

### **Rabindranath Tagore**

Sister Nivedita’s relationship with Rabindranath Tagore can be characterised with respectful friendliness despite differences of opinion in some issues. These two legends first met in the year 1898. Tagore considered her like any other foreign missionary as if she had come as a teacher to this country like many others. Tagore requested the Sister to take the charge of his daughter’s education so that his daughter’s knowledge in English develops like an English girl. Nivedita refused point blank, ‘Do you want me to play the part of transforming a Tagore into a little girl of the West End?’<sup>5</sup> ‘Are you, a Tagore, so influenced by Western culture

that you want to corrupt your child’s soul before it is fully formed?’ (ibid.). She did not want to enforce any foreign ideal or style on the young mind of Tagore’s daughter. Nivedita’s philosophy was to develop a child inspiring her or him inculcating the ideals of her own country or nationality. Rabindranath Tagore was highly impressed at Nivedita’s idea of developing a normal school which would make the child grow up in a manner having full-fledged respect to her or his national ideals so that the respect for the tradition and culture take a concrete shape. Tagore offered his house to establish a normal school according to Nivedita’s ideas. But she did not accept the offer as she was very busy with her school at Bose Para residence. In order to attract the youths of Brahmo samaj in the idealism of Sri Ramakrishna and Swamiji, Sister Nivedita organised a tea party at her Bose Para residence where Tagore and Swamiji participated. According to that plan, the tea party was held at Nivedita’s Bagh Bazar residence on 28 January 1899, where Rabindranath, Swamiji, and Nivedita talked. But it became evident that the impractical and emotional plan of bridging Sri Ramakrishna’s Kali worship and the Advaita philosophy of the Brahmos would never materialise. On 11 March 1899, Swamiji warned Nivedita, ‘as long as you go on mixing with that [Tagore] family Margot, I must go on sounding this gong. Remember that that family has poured a flood of erotic venom over Bengal.’<sup>6</sup> Both Rabindranath Tagore and Sister Nivedita did not allow any misunderstanding to persist in the long run because they had a great admiration for Indian tradition and culture which they had established in their work in their lifetime.

When Nivedita sent a batch of students on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas with Swami Sadananda, a disciple of Swamiji, Rabindranath sent his son Rathindranath with them so that his son learns discipline. On October 1904, a twenty



member team from Kolkata, including Nivedita, Rabindranath, Jagadishchandra Bose and his wife, Ratcliff—then editor of *The Statesman*—and his wife started for Bodh Gaya. In his reminiscence, Rathindranath Tagore—elder son of the poet—wrote, ‘The presence of three geniuses, Jagadishchandra, Nivedita and Rabindranath, made the sacred place of Bodh Gaya all the more extraordinary.’<sup>7</sup> He further remarked, ‘I believe this visit to Bodh Gaya resulted in my father’s profound interest in Buddhist religion and literature’ (ibid.).

During 1900–1905 Rabindranath stayed mostly at Shilaidaha. In 1904, Nivedita and Sister Christine went to Shilaidaha with Dr J C Bose to meet Rabindranath Tagore. Nivedita was very happy to meet the villagers and spent time with them. Rabindranath was highly moved at Nivedita’s deep love and association with the villagers. Nivedita had a motherly heart which was highly appreciated by Tagore which made him remark: ‘We had never seen such an image of Motherhood that could extend beyond a family to the whole country’ (139). ‘Discussions and singing songs with him were the main attractions there. One day Rabindranath sang

one of his devotional songs, Pratidin aami, hey jibanswami .... Nivedita list[en]ed with her eyes closed, engrossed in meditation’ (141).

One day she requested Rabindranath to tell a story. Sitting on the deck of his houseboat, he told a tale of a young Irishman: He wanted to stay in India just like an Indian. After assimilating Indian customs and cultures, he wanted to devote the rest of his life to the true progress of this country. But after learning about his foreign origin, his close female follower refused to accept him. Except for the ending, the storyline was of course that of Gora, the largest novel of Tagore. Hearing the story, Nivedita was emotionally very hurt. She herself was Irish. She was selflessly working for India. Now, telling her such a story was practically an insult to her (141–2).

Rabindranath later confessed in one of his letters to WW Pearson, ‘You ask me what connection the writing of Gora had with Sister Nivedita. She was our guest in Shilaidaha and in trying to improvise a story according to her request I gave her something very near to the plot of Gora. She was quite angry at the idea of Gora being rejected even by his disciple Sucharita owing to his foreign origin. You won’t find it in

*Shilaidaha Kuthi Bari of Rabindranath Tagore, now in Bangladesh*



Gora as it stands now—but I introduced it in my story which I told her in order to drive the point deep into her mind' (142).

Perhaps it was Sister Nivedita's objection compelled the poet to change his mind and wrote about Sucharita's compromise with Gora the main character of the novel.

Nivedita was so much overwhelmed at Tagore's literary prowess that during her stay in London, she introduced Rabindra literature to Western readers. With the assistance of Jagadishchandra and his wife Abala Bose, she translated three Rabindranath's short stories in English—*Kabuliwala*, *The Kabuliwallah*; *Dena-paona*, *Giving and Getting Return*; and *Chhuti*, *Leave of Absence*. But that first attempt to translate Tagore stories failed to attract any publisher. Patrick Geddes, the biographer of Jagadishchandra, commented that at that time 'the West was not sufficiently interested in Oriental life!'<sup>8</sup> In course of time, the manuscripts of *Dena-paona* and *Chhuti* were somehow lost. The *Kabuliwallah* was ultimately published in the January 1912 issue of the *Modern Review*, a few months after Nivedita died. It was later included among eleven others, in the first international edition of Tagore short stories, *Hungry Stones and Other Stories*.<sup>9</sup>

Pravrajika Atmaprana in her book *Sister Nivedita* had said that 'Though Sister Nivedita and Rabindranath met often, they never worked in collaboration at any time.'<sup>10</sup> She quotes from Rabindranath's essay that shows Tagore's deep sense of respect about sister's work and contribution towards the culture of this country: 'I had felt her great power, but with all that I understood that her path was not for me. She was a versatile genius, and there was another thing in her nature : that was her militancy. She had power and she exerted that power with full force on the lives of others. When it was not possible to agree with her, it was impossible to work with her' (ibid.).

However, these differences in their mental make-up and methods of work never stood in the way of their friendship. But Rabindranath has acknowledged that despite the differences and conflict he had received utmost benefits from her which cannot be compared with others in Tagore's lifetime. Tagore had also mentioned that he has got enough strength from the Great Sister. He further said: 'She is to be respected not because she was a Hindu but because she was great. She is to be honoured not because she was like us, but because she was greater than us' (245).

Tagore called her a Mother of the people—*Lokamata*. Tagore in his masterly written essay on the Sister paid a glowing tribute and said:

He who has seen her has seen the essential form of man, the form of the spirit. It is a piece of great good fortune to be able to see how the inner being of man reveals itself with unobstructed and undiminished energy and effulgence, nullifying the obstruction of all outer material coatings or impediments. We have been blessed in that we have witnessed that unconquered nobility of man in sister Nivedita. ... The life which Sister Nivedita gave for us was a very great life. There was no defrauding of us on her part—that is, she gave herself up fully for the service of India; she did not keep anything back for her own use. Every moment of everyday she gave whatever was best in her, whatever was noblest. For this she underwent all the privation and austerity that is possible for man. Her resolve was this and this alone—that she would give only that which was absolutely genuine; she would not mix self with it in the least;—no, not her hunger or thirst, profit or loss, name or fame; neither fear nor shrinking, nor ease nor rest. ... She was in fact a Mother of the People. We had not seen before an embodiment of the spirit of motherhood which, passing beyond the limits of the family, can spread itself over the whole country. We have had some idea of the sense of duty of man in this respect, but had not witnessed wholehearted mother-love of women.

When she uttered the words 'our People,' the tone of absolute kinship which struck the ear was not heard from any other among us. Whoever has seen what reality there was in her love of the people, has surely understood that we—while giving perhaps our time, our money, even our life—have not been able to give them our heart; we have not acquired the power to know the people as absolutely real and near. ... The man who does not see the people, the nation, in every man, may say with his lips what he likes, but he does not see the country properly. I have seen that Sister Nivedita *saw* the common people, *touched* them, did not simply think of them mentally. The respect with which she would greet some ordinary Mussulman woman dwelling in a hut in a village is not possible for an ordinary individual; for the vision that enables one to see the greatness of humanity in humble individuals is a very uncommon gift. It was because this vision was so natural to her that she did not lose her respect for India in spite of the nearness of her life to the life of the people of India for so long a time.<sup>11</sup>

Rabindranath wrote the introduction of the book titled *The Web of Indian Life* written by Sister Nivedita, on 21 October 1917. The book was first published in 1904. While writing its long introduction he analysed the Western mentality, specially the ruling British Government, and the recent political perspective of India:

For some time past a spirit of retaliation has taken possession of our literature and our social world. We have furiously begun to judge our judges, and the judgement comes from hearts sorely stricken with hopeless humiliation. And because our thoughts have an origin whose sound does not reach outside our country, or even the year of our governors within its boundaries, their expression is growing in vehemence. The prejudice cultivated on the side of the powerful is no doubt dangerous for the weak, but it cannot be wise on the part of the strong to ignore that thorny crop grown on the

opposite field. The upsetting of truth in the relationship of the ruler and the ruled can never be compensated by the power that lies in the grip of the mailed fist.<sup>12</sup>

In this perspective he mentioned the position of Sister Nivedita with great reverence:

And this was the reason which made us deeply grateful to Sister Nivedita, that great-hearted Western-woman, when she gave utterance to her criticism of Indian life. She had won her access to the inmost heart of our society by her supreme gift of sympathy. She did not come to us with the impertinent curiosity of a visitor, nor did she elevate herself on a special high perch with the idea that a bird's eye view is truer than the human view because of its superior aloofness. She lived our life and came to know us by becoming one of ourselves (x-xi).

Rabindranath had lifelong respect for Sister Nivedita about her sacrifice towards the cause of India. A few months before his death, on 23 May 1941, Rabindranath was more analytical in his conversation with Rani Chanda, 'Women have one thing, that is their very inner one—Emotion. When this Emotion mixes with character, it becomes wonderful. Nivedita showed the example ... She loved this country as well as its people with all her heart. It is difficult to express how pure this love was. She sacrificed her everything. Her bravery and self-denial astonished me.'<sup>13</sup> This statement shows Tagore's deep sense of admiration of the Sister Nivedita.

### **Sri Aurobindo**

Nivedita's contribution towards Sri Aurobindo's life was significant. In order to preach her ideals and philosophy of Swami Vivekananda Nivedita started a Nation-wide tour. In September 1902, she toured western India and raised funds through public lectures and private meetings. On 20 October, she arrived in Baroda. Sri Aurobindo received her at the railway station. This was their



first meeting. Both of them got along very well. The subject of their discussion was neither religion nor the philosophy of Vivekananda, but the political developments in Bengal. She stressed the need of Aurobindo's reaching Calcutta to give effective lead to the nationalists and revolutionary forces in Bengal. According to Lizelle Reymond, the famous Biographer of Sister Nivedita, Nivedita was among the few persons in India who knew that Sri Aurobindo was the directing brain behind the nationalist movement in Bengal, despite his physical absence. The same author gives us the valuable information that Nivedita was one of the five members of the political committee which Aurobindo Ghosh appointed to unite in a single organisation, the small and scattered groups of rebels which had sprung into existence and were acting without reference to one another. During this tour programme Nivedita attracted thousands of young men and women to her. Nivedita did not believe the passive resistance and the non-cooperation as a path of achieving freedom. So she strongly supported Sri Aurobindo's view of hidden revolutionary activity as a preparation for open revolt. This revolutionary spirit and common perception about freedom movement between these two great personalities brought them more closer for the cause of revolutionary activities. The freedom movement brought many great leaders close to Nivedita like Bipin Chandra Pal, R C Dutt, Gopal Krishna Gokhale.

In the Alipore bomb case Sri Aurobindo was imprisoned. During his imprisonment he practised Yoga and began to study Gita and Upanishads. From this time his view of life began to change and he entered into a spiritual life. After he was released from jail in 1909 Sri Aurobindo understood that the spirit of nationalism was dying. To ignite the spirit of nationalism he arranged weekly meetings but did not get much response. He started editing two

weeklies—*Karmayogin* in English and *Dharma* in Bengali. Both of these periodicals published articles on Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Yoga, Hindu Dharma, and many philosophical issues. During this time he met Sister Nivedita on many occasions at her Baghbazar residence. During this time British Government wanted to make some reforms in administration. Sri Aurobindo's idea was no compromise and no cooperation. The government realised that Sri Aurobindo was the only obstacle in the way of their repressive tactics. They decided to deport him. Nivedita got this news and informed Sri Aurobindo about this and advised him to go into a hidden place or work from outside India. Aurobindo did not want to leave the country. Ultimately Government dropped the idea of deportation. Aurobindo heard news in the meantime that *Karmayogin's* office was to be searched by the Government to arrest him. Sri Aurobindo left for Chandannagore. He sent a message requesting Nivedita to edit *Karmayogin*. Nivedita did this work till the paper was suspended. Aurobindo reached Chandannagore in February 1910. Nivedita reached there on 14th February. It was the day of Saraswati puja and she came back in the night. In the same month on 27th Nivedita again went to Chandannagore. There are some anecdotes about Sri Aurobindo's arrest and escape towards Chandannagore. Mr Ramchandra Majumdar gave this message to Sri Aurobindo about his impending arrest. Sri Aurobindo asked Ramchandra to consult Nivedita what should be done. Nivedita advised him to go for hiding. Aurobindo went to Bosepara lane to meet Sister Nivedita and left for Chandannagore. It has been mentioned in the biography of Nivedita written by Lizelle Reymond that Aurobindo's news of impending arrest was first received by Yogin Ma and it was Ganen Maharaj who informed Sri Aurobindo about his impending arrest. Before

leaving it is said Sri Aurobindo went to Udbodhan to meet Holy Mother and Nivedita. Nivedita as well as Ganen Maharaj went to see him off. The English edition of Nivedita's biography entitled 'The Dedicated' mentioned that Ganen Maharaj did not advise Aurobindo about his impending arrest but it was Ramchandra Majumdar, a staff of the *Karmayogin*, whose father had said that the office of the magazine would be raided and Aurobindo would be arrested. Aurobindo denied that Ganen Maharaj gave this news to him. He said that it was neither Nivedita nor Ganen Maharaj that came to see him off. In fact Sri Aurobindo writes that Sister Nivedita knew nothing of going to Chandannagore.<sup>14</sup> According to Sri Aurobindo the decision to go to Chandannagore was a command from above and he followed that command. It seems when the British was planning to deport Sri Aurobindo Nivedita advised him to go for hiding perhaps he followed this suggestion at this crucial moment. It has also been mentioned in many biographies that Nivedita procured money from Dr J C Bose to meet Sri Aurobindo's expenses of going to Pondicherry but Aurobindo has not mentioned anything about it.

Sri Aurobindo had tremendous trust in Nivedita. He left the paper *Karmayogin* in Nivedita's hands to publish the magazine. Under Nivedita's editorship magazine's approach was totally changed from politics to Swami Vivekananda's ideologies. In one of the issues of the *Karmayogin* is given her philosophy and approach towards India:

I believe that India is one, indissoluble, indivisible.

National unity is built on the common home, the common interest and the common love.

I believe that the strength which spoke in the Vedas and Upanishads, in the making of religions and empires, in the learning of

scholars, and the meditation of the saints, is born once more amongst us, and its name today is Nationality.

I believe that the present of India is deep-rooted in her past, and that before her shines a glorious future.

O Nationality, come thou to me as joy or sorrow, as honour or as shame! Make me thine own!<sup>15</sup>

In another occasion Sister Nivedita had said: 'If the whole of India could agree to give, say, ten minutes every evening, at the oncoming of darkness to thinking a single thought, "we are one, we are one nothing can prevail against us to make us think we are divided. We are one, and all antagonisms amongst us are illusions"—the power that would be generated can hardly be measured.'<sup>16</sup>


The unique feature of the Nivedita's way of action was her love for freedom. When she met Sri Aurobindo first time in 1902 she never discussed

*Residence of Motilal Roy in Chandannagore  
where Sri Aurobindo stayed*



with him any philosophy or religion but political development of Bengal. She stressed the need of Aurobindo's reaching Calcutta and asked him to take the lead in the Nationalist and Revolutionary movement. Both of these great personalities had great mutual respect and admiration for each other. This spirit worked in their joint action for the cause of the Nationalism. After the departure of Sri Aurobindo to Pondicherry the Government used to keep a constant watch on Nivedita. Her post was censored constantly. She would get her packets and letters which were completely torn. She wrote a protest letter to the Postmaster General about this uncalled for intervention which interferes with the principle of personal freedom.

The above account clearly shows Sister Nivedita was the source of inspiration of these three great sons of modern India—Rabindranath Tagore, Sir J C Bose, and Sri Aurobindo. Nivedita had a profound influence in the activities of these three great persons. Tagore's beautiful short stories were brought to the knowledge of English knowing world by the Nivedita herself. Sir J C Bose's epoch making experiments was first admired by the dedicated Nivedita and Sri Aurobindo's sacrifice towards the country's freedom struggle gained life at her direct inspiration. India has priceless tradition. Her culture and religion have been glorious from time immemorial, from the dawn of the civilization. As a foreigner she understood this aspect of Indian culture with profound interest at direct inspiration from Swami Vivekananda—her master, philosopher, and guide. The realisation and action of these three great men are wonderful manifestation of India's glorious literary and cultural legacy, religious values, ethical principles which is called *Bharat Atma*—the soul of India. Credit of this Western lady was that she realized the main tenets of our civilization and inspired

the contemporary people of talent to grow further and utilize their potentialities to their utmost worth. Here lies the significance of this great Sister Nivedita and her countless contributions to the achievements of these three great personalities of Mother India. 

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# On Sister Nivedita

Vijaya Bharati

[The granddaughter of C Subramania Bharati (1882–1921) and the daughter of Thangammal Bharati (b. 1904), Vijaya Bharati worked as a Tamil lecturer at the Sri Avinashilingam Home Science College, Coimbatore. She wrote the book *C Subramania Bharati* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1972). The part of this book connected with Sister Nivedita is being reproduced here due to its importance. This text has been researched by Swami Kamalatmananda, Adhyaksha, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madurai—*Editor*.]

**B**HARATI WENT TO VARANASI for the Congress meeting in 1905. On his way back to Madras, he passed through Calcutta, where he met Sister Nivedita, the disciple of Vivekananda, in Dum Dum.

Bharati dedicated his national poems later to Sister Nivedita, whom he considered his guru. His meeting with her brought about many changes in his personality. He was greatly attracted to her rare vigour, force of love and strength of wisdom. Her very appearance reflected her inner light. Bharati sings in adoration of Sister Nivedita:

An offering to grace, a temple of love  
As a sun that dispels the darkness in my heart,  
As benevolent rain to my thirsty land,  
As unbounded wealth to the destitute,  
As a burning flame to the bondage of slavery,  
Exists Mother Nivedita, at whose feet,  
I bow in adoration.

She was the artistic spirit unifying Bharati's

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Vijaya Bharati is the granddaughter of the famous Tamil poet C Subramania Bharati.

emotions, stray and confused in the beginning. Sister Nivedita's external appearance was a true reflection of her inner harmony. Her soul, full of the sparks of a raging fire, was capable of stringing Bharati's emotions into a thread of unity and order. The power of her love attracted the being coming into contact with it, ultimately transforming it into Love itself. The great wave of love in Sister Nivedita's heart, without need for words or long association, filled Bharati's heart as an instrument of great power. As hearts came near, the one put order into the other's inner faculties. The spirit of love concealed within was kindled into a raging flame. Bharati speaks of this unusual experience in his dedicatory lines to Nivedita:

As Lord Krishna revealed his mighty form to Arjuna and explained the state of Atman, the Guru showed me the form of Bharat Matha in its completeness and taught me to love my country. I dedicate this slender volume at the flowery feet of my guru.

I dedicate this book to Srimathi Nivedita Devi, the spiritual offspring of Bhagawan Vivekananda, the most excellent of all spiritual teachers. She taught me the nature of true service to the Mother, and the greatness of asceticism—all this through unspoken wisdom.

Bharati refers to a vision of the complete form of Bharat Matha, Mother India, saying that the clarity of the heart endowed upon him by Nivedita presented this happy vision. The sequence of time in which the vision revealed itself is brief. And this is why, leaving aside the powerful influences of Tilak and many other political

personalities, Bharati regards Nivedita his preceptor; hence the dedication.

Bharati compares his vision of Mother India to the mighty form of Lord Krishna revealed to Arjuna. Krishna's form makes Arjuna realise his own self. Nivedita's presentation of the vision of Mother India reveals the mighty form of the Mother of Bharati. He realises the nature of true service and the glory of the ascetic way of life. In his national songs, we find this picture of the Mother imprinted firmly on the emotional screen of the poet's personality, presented from a variety of angles.

Nivedita's teaching of Bharati by silence is comparable in our legends only to the silent teaching of Lord Dakshinamurthy, the silent preceptor. Bharati visualises Mother India as Mother Shakti. His experience of Mother Shakti is fascinating. The vision is the same; but the experience of it varies. The completeness of this vision had earned for his national poems the reputed title, 'Desopanishad', comparing the poems with the Upanishadic wisdom of ancient India.

Bharati's meeting with Nivedita also influenced him to fight later for the freedom and equality of women of our country. Bharati's idea of freedom for women is born on the basis of a spiritual realisation:

Freedom for women is based on a realisation of the self. Men and women are equal and as long as they do not harm each other they have the liberty to act according to their will and pleasure.

Bharati says that man's duty in society is to protect the woman and to act as a hedge around her. His ten commandments about the freedom of women are as follows:

1. Girls must not be married off before attaining the age of puberty.
2. They must not be compelled to marry a man whom they don't fancy.
3. Even after marriage she should have the free-

dom to live apart from her husband; she shall not be put to shame on this score.

4. Girls must get an equal share in ancestral property.
5. After the husband's death women must be allowed to remarry.
6. Women who would prefer to remain spinsters must be allowed to do so, provided they are able to earn a living independently.
7. The condition laid on women that they must not speak to or associate with men other than their husbands must be removed, as this is born out of fear and jealousy.
8. Women like men, must be allowed the advantages of higher education in all the branches of knowledge.
9. If they are qualified to employ themselves in any government jobs, this must not be prevented by law.
10. There is now no use to plead for women's rights in the government as even men in the country do not have it. However, if the country were to become independent soon, women must be given a share in the government as men.

Bharathi came back to Madras vigorously determined to fight for India's freedom. To add to his enthusiasm. A weekly magazine *India* had been started by Thirumalachariar. This was the beginning of an era of originality, individuality, experimentation, and novelty for the journalist Bharati. *India* magazine was published from 34, Broadway, Madras, till September 1908, when, due to governmental interference, publication ceased. The legal editor of *India*, M Srinivasan was arrested and imprisoned for five years, and Bharati escaped to the French territory of Pondicherry. *India* magazine was resumed from October 20 of the same year, from Pondicherry. Though Bharati was the editor of *India*, he continued as sub-editor of *Swadesamitran* and many of his poems and essays appeared in *Swadesamitran* during the same period as his editorial work for the *India* magazine.

# On Sister Nivedita

Lalitha Bharati

[The granddaughter of C Subramania Bharati (1882–1921) and the eldest daughter of Thangammal Bharati (b. 1904), Lalitha Bharati wrote this article in Tamil on the request of Swami Kamalatmananda, Adhyaksha, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madurai. It is being translated into English and printed here due to its importance—*Editor*.]

SISTER NIVEDITA WAS A LIONESSE. She was patriotic and fearless, just as Swami Vivekananda. She had a great role in the national awakening that started in Bengal. Inspired by her, many youths sacrificed themselves for the cause of Indian freedom.

In 1905 a Congress meeting was held in Varanasi. Subramania Bharati attended it. A wonderful experience that he had after this meeting, changed him completely.

Those days, the goddess of knowledge, Sister Nivedita, resided in Dum Dum in Calcutta. There Bharati met her. He later recounted to my grandmother: ‘That encounter is a great unforgettable incident of my life.’

Bharati’s meeting with Sister Nivedita is an interesting incident. During that meeting, Bharati thought: ‘Though she may be Swami Vivekananda’s disciple, she is after all an English lady!’ Those inner thoughts of his were immediately understood by Sister Nivedita and she said to him: ‘Son! Remove the feelings of distinction that arise in your mind. Give up the uncivilised differences like caste, creed, religion, and lineage.

Have only love towards all. In the future, you will become a courageous individual who would attain historical fame.’ Sister Nivedita thus advised and blessed Bharati.

Then Nivedita asked him: ‘Dear! Are you not married yet?’ Bharati replied: ‘I am married and have a child.’ Nivedita asked: ‘Why did you not bring your wife with you?’ To that Bharati said: ‘In our country, there is no custom of taking one’s wife as one’s equal to public places. Further, what is the use of bringing her to Congress meetings?’

This greatly angered Sister Nivedita and she calmly told Bharati: ‘Son! Most men, though educated, are selfish and arrogant. They consider women as slaves. If even some wise men like you dwell in ignorance and do not give education to women and do not treat them equally, how can the country be reformed socially?’ She said further: ‘Alright. Let the past be past. At least hereafter, do not consider your wife as separate from you. Treat her as your left hand and consider her as a goddess.’

My grandmother has told me: ‘Bharati used to happily recount the instructions he got from Sister Nivedita.’ She has mentioned the song ‘*Sonna sol ethendru solven*, I would tell what I was told’ in her Tamil biography of Bharati, *Bharatiyar Charittiram*.

Through his meeting with Sister Nivedita, Bharati also got the blessings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Bharati had a special place in his heart for Sister Nivedita. It is noteworthy that Sister Nivedita was the guru of Bharati, who held women in high regard. His feelings had his guru’s inspiration.



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Lalitha Bharati is the granddaughter of the famous Tamil poet C Subramania Bharati.





## ***Sister Nivedita's Observations on Indian History and Culture***

**C Jayanarayanan**

**A**MONG THE DISCIPLES OF Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita was held in high esteem by both moderate and extremist leaders of early twentieth century India. Unlike other Westerners, she did not come to patronise Indians but to serve them. She made sincere efforts to study our scriptures and history. This,

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she did exceptionally well, that too within a short span of thirteen years. Her books that are still very popular prove her deep scholarship and intellectual integrity in upholding our claim to a rich cultural heritage. She reached Indian shores only on 28 January 1898 and passed away on 13 October 1911. Before coming to India, except for attending two or three lectures of Swamiji, she had no exposure on Indian culture or its spiritual literature. In spite of these limitations, she

did grasp the core of Indianness and history of its civilisation within such a short period, which in itself is a remarkable achievement.

### **Definition of History**

'The character of a people is their history as written in their own subconscious mind and to understand that character we have to turn on it the limelight of their history.'<sup>1</sup> The premium is therefore on the character or culture of a people and history is merely a help to decipher what is written on their subconscious mind; in other words their civilisation. History is not merely a chronological account of kings and kingdoms as is popularly understood. On the other hand it is the record of the community's civilisational progression. Civilisation of a people is determined by their geographical location, climate, natural resources, and the civilisations in their neighbourhood. The task of history is to delineate such factors that have gone into the making of a nation. Her view is that a kingdom or an empire is the expanded organisation of people, the smallest being a tribal set up or village council. When tribal loyalties are subordinated to embrace national loyalties, a nation is borne. When such a nation evolves a political organization, it is a nation state. From this it follows that a State—nation State—to exist, the people should have a common cultural background. A common language or religion may be some of the desirable condition but not at all the essential. Here lies the crux of Sister Nivedita's findings that India, long before the establishment of Mauryan empire in the fourth century BC, was not only culturally but also emotionally united. It is on record that Chandragupta after defeating the Greeks who were in occupation of the North-Western India, returned to Pataliputra to rule. Evidently, the empire had sufficient road and communication

network to command the forces and to maintain supplies from such a distant place. The port city of Tamralipti—modern Tamluk—in the eastern coast was linked by road to Banaras in the north. Chanakya himself states in his monumental work *Arthashastra* that Dakshinapath—the southern road—is safer than the Uttarapath—northern road—that leads to Taxila, in the present-day Pakistan, for conduct of trade. So she concludes that 'the Indian people may be defective in the methods of mechanical organisation, but they have been lacking, as a people, in none of the essentials of organic synthesis' (4.13).

Taxila was the gate way into India at the north-west frontier from where roads opened to China, Nineveh, Persepolis, and Babylonia. At this cross junction not only exchange of goods and services took place but also cultural elements like arts and architecture. Western scholars notably Grund Wedel, Fergusson, and Vincent Smith have contended that India borrowed decorative arts from the Greeks and Persians. They had pointed out that the winged animals of Sarnath are Greek in origin and Pillars in Ajanta cave resemble the one in Persepolis. Statues in Ajanta caves belong to two distinct styles. The earlier one, as Buddha seated on his throne as in Sarnath is purely Indian in style. The later ones, when Khandesh region was under Vakataka rule, are slightly different. Here the Buddha is standing with a Roman upper-cloth on his shoulders. This is clearly a modification incorporating Greek cultural elements. Sister Nivedita with her sharp intellect, with the precision of a surgeon's knife cuts through these superficial readings and asserts Indian originality, albeit a few decorative elements that are Greek. Perhaps these scholars did not realise that, unlike Indians, Greeks and Romans made naked statues. We can therefore

find Greek influence in Gandhara arts and Buddha statues found in present day Afghanistan. 'Unless then there should be unimpugnable evidence to the contrary, the rule being that ideals create symbolisms as their vehicle, and the source of Buddhist thought having always been Magadha, we should expect that that country would also be the creative centre in matters of Buddhist art' (4.73). The railed Balconies of Rajput and Mughal architecture bear definitely the stamp of Persia. However what is to be appreciated is the genius of our forefathers who absorbed these elements to create something unique and bearing undoubtedly the stamp of Indian creativity.

Sister Nivedita placed much reliance on travel for historical research, as in the absence proper, except a few works like *Rajatarangini*, India is the only source book for historical research. She states: 'If India itself be the book of history, it follows that travel is the true means of reading that history' (4.11). She further adds: 'In history also, we want to be able to see, not the thing that would be pleasant, but the thing that is true' (4.12). She notes that from the relics of Rajgir and other locations of historical importance, we can definitely map the historical sequence and how one style replaced a prevailing style, associated with a particular religious entity. Thus the entwined Tamarind trees might have replaced the Bo tree and tombs of Muslim peers the Buddhist stupas. It also helps us to know the disposal of population at the particular period.

The Shakya prince turned Gautam Buddha was the first and only religious preacher who encouraged evangelization in ancient India. He preached his eight fold path to the peasants of the vast Gangetic plain for their salvation. Though he did not establish a church, he had caught the imagination of the plebian

that till then was unconcerned with the high philosophical moorings of the Vedas and Upanishads. To them he preached his system of thought in their colloquial language and therefore, he for the first time nationalized the Indian peasants. 'To Gautam Buddha the peasant of Bihar owes his place in Hinduism. By Him he was nationalised' (4.40-1). Till then, only the upper crust of the society could afford the costly Vedic rituals or comprehend the high platitudes of the philosophy of the Upanishads. Her guru, the venerable Swami Vivekananda, had asserted, as early as in his third lecture to Parliament of Religions 1893: 'I repeat, Shakyamuni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfilment, the logical conclusion, the logical development of the religion of the Hindus.'<sup>2</sup> She, his favourite disciple has taken the cue and came up with an unambiguous assertion: 'Socially Buddhism in India never consisted of a church but only of a religious order. Doctrinally it meant the scattering of that wisdom which had hitherto been peculiar to Brahmin and Kshatriya amongst the democracy. Nationally it meant the first social unification of the Indian people. Historically it brought about the birth of Hinduism.'<sup>3</sup> This is true because the Indian character is such that it accommodates all diverse views and do not divide people on religious lines. Because of the magnetic personality of Gautam Buddha, all choose to follow him and later, on his Nirvana, they installed him as God incarnate. The religious order founded by him dwindled for historical reasons and disappeared in India. It survives to this day in China and East Asia. The reason is not far to seek. Ancient China had a moral law giver or philosopher like Confucius, who was not concerned with theology and God. This gap was filled by Buddhism. On the other hand, in India, we had the religion of



the Vedas and Buddhism was the catalyst for its rebirth as the present day popular Hinduism.

Sister Nivedita also states the apparent: 'It may be well to say that Buddhism did not originate the ideas which in their totality make up Hinduism' (4.81). She was the first to assert that: 'But one of the master-facts in Indian history, a fact borne in upon us more deeply with every hour of study, is that India is and always has been a synthesis' (4.12-3). Therefore she traces

the progression of the religion of the Vedas to present day popular Hinduism through the intellectual field ploughed and watered by Buddhism. The great preacher himself has become the god-head as Shiva of the Shaivites and Lord Jagannath of the Vaishnavites. In the age of Puranas the transformation was complete. No one can miss the similarity in shape of Buddhist Stupas to *Shiva-lingas* and *Shalagrama-shilas* that are the object of ritual worship of Shaivites and

*This Painting 'The Victory of Buddha' by Abanindranath Tagore was Used as the Frontispiece to 'Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists' by Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy, 1913.*



Vashnavites respectively. She also notes the fact that all the major centres of Hindu pilgrimage lay on the Himalayan route to Tibet and China. Perhaps these temples, once frequented by Buddhist pilgrims on their journey to and from Tibet, might have re-emerged as Hindu places of worship on disappearance of Buddhism from India. The Vedic god Rudra was re-invented in the age of Puranas as Shiva, whose image as a mendicant is strikingly similar to the Shakya prince who renounced his kingdom for the sake of the true path. Resilience is the real strength of Hinduism and the secret of its survival for more than five thousand years.

This daughter of India from the other shores was in full sympathy with the aspirations of the Indian masses. She wanted to contribute for the rejuvenation of the Nation which was the sole mission of her Guru. In the beginning she had placed much reliance on the sense of justice of the British people. However later on she realised that the exalted British claims of human rights and rule of law is only for the Britishers and not for the masses of the colonies. She therefore became fully sympathetic to the aspirations of the Nationalists. She was an able defender of India and her civilisation. Her book *The Web of Indian Life* was a convincing reply to the unfair criticism of the European missionaries, notably Ms Catherine Mayo.

Her premium for Indian rejuvenation was national unity. She wrote: 'The Mogul Empire fell into decay and failed, simply because it did not understand how to base itself on a great popular conception of Indian unity. It could neither assimilate the whole of the religious impulse of India, nor yet detach itself completely from it. Hence, as a government, it succeeded neither in rooting itself permanently, nor in creating that circuit of national energy which alone could have given it endurance.'<sup>4</sup> She also wanted to

instil a sense of pride in the intellectual achievements of our ancestors and readily conceded their superiority to the Europeans. On her visit to Rajgir, the ancient capital of Magadha, she remarked: 'Well may the Indian people glory in the ancestry which already lived in this splendour, while that of Northern and Western Europe went clad in painted woad.'<sup>5</sup> Such kind remarks from a European were welcome at a time when Missionaries rejoiced in deriding India and her religion.

In his introduction of her famous work *The web of Indian Life*, poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote 'And this was the reason which made us deeply grateful to Sister Nivedita, that great-hearted Western woman, when she gave utterance to her criticism of Indian life. She had won her access to the inmost heart of our society by her supreme gift of sympathy. She did not come to us with the impertinent curiosity of a visitor, nor did she elevate herself on a special high perch.'<sup>6</sup> These words are sufficient to prove that the observations of Sister Nivedita on Indian history and culture were constructive and helpful to inspire the young.



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## ***Swami Vivekananda's Presence in Sister Nivedita's Life***

**Linda Prugh**

**W**E CARRY A GREAT GOSPEL in our memories and written in scraps in old diaries and letters. ... for this Voice [of Vivekananda's] I have the right to appropriate if I will.<sup>1</sup> So wrote Sister Nivedita on 22 February 1904 to her friend S K Ratcliffe, editor of *The Statesman*. Her statement encapsulates the

method that carried her through eight years from the original concept of writing a life of Swami Vivekananda to the publication of *The Master as I Saw Him*, which remains today a beloved classic in Ramakrishna-Vivekananda literature. In this article we will take a look at the steps of her struggle in creating this tremendous tribute to her guru.

### ***Precious Scraps***

One of the principal sources that Nivedita used

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for her writing of *The Master as I Saw Him*, were precious ‘scraps’ from her own letters. In 1982 the first edition of *Letters of Sister Nivedita* was published in two volumes. The devoted editor was Sankari Prasad Basu. In his moving preface, he wrote: ‘The hard labour [of publishing these letters] was rewarded beyond measure by the thrill we felt in being so close to the living presence of a great soul. Nivedita’s letters made us realise, at least to a degree, how great one can be’ (1.25).

Since first reading these letters I have loved them because they are filled with vivid references to and verbatim quotes of Swamiji. Even those letters that do not mention the great Swamiji, breathe his presence. Nivedita herself was constantly absorbed in the swami and his broad depth of feeling that had opened up a whole new world to her, so it is natural that her letters would carry his deep impress. Thinking that she had not really had that much training from him, at least not as much as she would wish, she was delighted when Josephine MacLeod wrote to her and mentioned that Swamiji had told her an amazing thing about Nivedita. On 8 September 1904, she replied to Joe: ‘I love those letters in which you tell me some word of His that I never heard before. This time it is, that He had spent years of effort in training me, such as He had spent on no other. Things like that, make one trustful of oneself’ (2.677).

### **Dear Joe**

Nivedita’s letters to her dear friend Josephine MacLeod are particularly open and frank, reflecting love, trust, and friendship between them. Nivedita knew she could tell Joe anything, and that Joe would not judge her. Once in 1900 Joe MacLeod had written in a letter to an American follower of Swamiji who had been very critical of Nivedita:

My attitude towards Margot I could not explain—did I not have the same in a greater degree towards Swamiji ... Perhaps it is ... my mental attitude toward most humans. I dare not criticize what I cannot myself do—and so in regard to Margot—her method—her manner of life—her insight into things is so extraordinary from my standpoint, that I deem it one of the privileges of my life to have known her and to have had her confidence. She is way beyond my depth and all I have ever done is to listen to her—with a respect that verges on veneration. Both she and Swami [Vivekananda] must feel this unspoken attitude—and thence the freedom they both feel toward me.<sup>2</sup>

Swamiji’s mahasamadhi on Friday, 4 July 1902, left his ardent disciple Sister Nivedita in shock. For seven years she had been so close to him and his work, his universal ideas of religion and paths for the modern spiritual seeker, the regeneration of India, and the establishment of a radically new kind of monastic order that would serve, rather than withdraw from, the world. For him she had given up her home and family in England and moved to India where she lived as a nun, lectured, wrote, taught, and nursed plague victims. She also kept in touch by letter with numerous followers of Swamiji in the West. Now, on 4th July 1902, she wrote only two words in her diary: ‘Swami died.’<sup>3</sup>

Sister Nivedita had little energy or will to do anything at this sad time, but she was still needed to notify others of his passing, some by cable, knowing that in many cases the recipient would be devastated. In turn many of the swami’s followers were contacting her, conveying shocked reactions, memories of the great teacher, and other expressions of grief. These she felt bound to acknowledge and address, and to those who were very close friends, such as Josephine MacLeod and Sara Bull, she poured out her heart.

### **We Must Accumulate**

In the back of her mind, however, there was an inkling of what she might do to honour Swamiji a life of the swami must be written. His was a life that the world needed. His message was for all humanity, not a handful. His life was too huge; he was too huge. Within days, she knew that she would want to be the one to write that life. In a letter to Josephine MacLeod, possibly written 24 July 1902, she suggested: 'If you ever feel up to it, you might go through or get someone to go through my old letters, and copy out about Swami—scenes and words. For I must accumulate towards a Life. There will not for long be another pen so fit.'<sup>4</sup>

Before July was out, Sister Nivedita had managed to write a tremendous tribute, 'The National Significance of the Swami Vivekananda's Life and Work,' which was published in *The Hindu*, in Madras on 27 July 1902. In that tribute she wrote: 'He lived when men were abandoning their inheritance, and he was an ardent worshipper of the old. In him the national destiny fulfilled itself, that a new wave of consciousness should be inaugurated always in the leaders of the Faith. In such a man it may be that we possess the whole Veda of the future.'<sup>5</sup>

### **Vivekananda's Voice**

In 1901, while still travelling in the West, Nivedita had begun writing *The Web of Indian Life*. She finished it in September 1903, and it was published in June 1904. Nivedita felt that this book was truly the result of Swamiji's working through her. Writing to Josephine MacLeod on 9 September 1903, she declared: 'It is not my book at all, but Swamiji's, and that my one hope about it is that I may have said the things that He would have liked said.'<sup>6</sup> When I first read this book I was amazed. It was Vivekananda's voice—the same voice I heard when reading his letters, conversations, and other

writings. *The Web of Indian Life* received a number of appreciative reviews; and some extremely negative ones. But Nivedita's self-confidence rose, and she began making tentative stabs at writing a life of Swamiji.<sup>7</sup>

On 29 April 1903, Nivedita wrote to Joe MacLeod: 'God grant me to speak brave true words in His Name before I die—words with His life flowing through them untainted, unimpaired—that I may see that last confidence shining in His face once more—and go away into eternity, feeling that I have not disappointed him.'<sup>8</sup>

In 1904 Nivedita's mind spun around and around, as she reflected on what had happened to her over the last several years, since meeting Swamiji. She was searching for answers as to what she was intended to do now. Could she write a life of Swamiji or not? Her letters of this period reflect intense self-searching, often self-doubt, and serious mining of her own memories for various things he had told her.

### **'Never Mind Your Mistakes'**

On 22 February 1904, Nivedita wrote to her friend S K Ratcliffe, editor of *The Statesman*:

[Vivekananda told me]: 'All yr. [your] life—spent with the rich or the poor, the wise or the ignorant—when it comes to judgement, and a battle between heart and mind, *follow the heart*. You may make mistakes. Never mind. Without mistakes there is no progress. If the mind can supplement the heart—well and good. Otherwise, let the heart lead. It is as a river. You may lead it and guide it by canals or cross it by bridges. But the river is the most important. It carries all things with it. It makes all things. It is the force of things' (2.629).

To Joe MacLeod, she wrote on 4 July 1904: 'Swamiji Himself said to me: "Be brave, Margot! Take *every* opportunity. Only have courage—and I will send the means!"' (2.654).

### **He Demanded the Whole**

On 26 July 1904, she wrote to Joe MacLeod, reflecting on her work with the great Swamiji:

I have worked for others as a hand or a tool, but He alone demanded the whole of my heart and head and being, and left it to me to use them for Him. Both kinds of service, all kinds of service, are great and good, but this alone is all-absorbing—because this alone implies perfect faith.

And how short was the time that He gave me for training! ... I can see now that He was longing for someone to pour His own mind and thought into. Oh that I may never harden my nature so as to lose one atom of it! And At Ridgely [September to November 1899] the training ended, and I was sent out into the world. ... And now, I cannot tolerate anyone's even touching the question of what I shall or shall not think of Him and His opinions. There, I need freedom, as a bird needs air. But when I have had the full swing, and no one has dared to criticise or dictate or cavil (at least in my hearing) then I know and you know, dearest mother Yum, that it is all Swamiji, all Swamiji, all Swamiji, and outside Him I have nothing whatsoever. ...

I always knew that I was waiting for something. I always said that a call would come. And it did. ... always I had this burning voice within, but nothing to utter. How often and often I have sat down, pen in hand, to speak, and there was no speech. And now, there is no end to it! As surely as I am fitted for my world—so surely is my world in need of me, waiting, ready. The arrow has found its own place in the bow. But *if* He had not come! If He had meditated on the Himalayan peaks as the wise Capt. Sevier wanted Him to do—I, for one, had never never been here (2.661).

### **I Had to Walk Alone**

On 5 November 1904 Nivedita wrote to Alberta Sturges:

I used to long so much for [spiritual guidance] from Swamiji. But He gave it so

sparingly—with such worlds of reserve. It is only very gradually that I have begun to see the burning light of each word of help—the unfailing insight—so that He never allowed me to go to confession—but I should not learn to walk alone—yet contrived to give me the help that it would have been, without one wasted word and crowned it with the Absolution of him who is *drowned in God*. I never found in anyone such an understanding of and sympathy with, my love of Catholic Christianity, as I found in Him (2.688–9). ...

My intellectual life of many many years might be summed up as a wild longing to be restored to [the Catholic Church], combined with a hopeless inability to subscribe to the doctrine of the objective and exclusive truth of her creeds. And then came Swamiji, and gave me everything, everything that I had longed for, even the ideal of the nun—and with it the burning love of *Truth*, that shone like a star above Him, and made Him the hope and power of the modern as of the old (2.690).

### **I Am Not Yet Fit**

On 13 November 1904, she answered a letter from Josephine MacLeod:

You asked me last week about His Life. It is my one longing. But sometimes I think I am not yet fit—and I shall not be allowed to do it, till I am. I have begun more than once. So far it is a failure. Pray to Him that He will love me and approve of me, and tell me what do and how. One thing that I know is that He will not 'give me up'—for He did that to none. But I wanted to do His work for Him—to bear his burden—to stand relief-guard at His outpost—and my brain is so incapable! ...

I am beginning to feel that this service [of writing his life] is not limited even by this life—and it is worthwhile to go on adding to knowledge and fitness for His use—that possibly He will go on using me for 200 years in this one task—!!! (2.697).



### ***He Should Move like Jesus through the Gospels***

Other letters of this period begin to show how Nivedita slowly matured in her approach to the task of writing the life of Vivekananda. On 26 January 1905, writing to Joe MacLeod, she stated: 'To be properly written—Swamiji's life should be all Swamiji. He should move through it, like JESUS through the Gospels, alone, unfettered, unshadowed. But I feel incapable of this, and capable only of telling what *I* have seen in Him. ... I feel as if an account of His Life would be the only way of conveying it even to my own friends and followers' (2,714).

### ***What Swamiji Told Me***

Nivedita's letters also reveal much about herself as a worker with other workers. Nivedita and Sister

Christine had been living together for varying lengths of time since 1902. Now Nivedita was feeling the urgent need for some privacy. On 13 December 1905 she wrote to Joe MacLeod, describing what she herself needed as a writer. She wrote:

Bless you, bless you, for the closing words of this last letter, that next must come His Life from my pen. I feel that this year, 1906, I shall leave India and come West. In order to write, it is essential that I get the fresh stimulus. ...

[Christine and I] have spoken of things frankly, and she says that I do make a great demand for love and sympathy—which she does not feel that she can give—and which she would not be sure that it was right to give, if she could. That is not her ideal. I consider that I owe her a great deal for so clear a statement—for without it, I might have struggled on, trying to do things, and only half succeeding—whereas with

*Nivedita Breathed Her Last at Roy Villa, Darjeeling*



it before me, I suddenly felt illuminated.

I know it is true about the demand I make—but I do think that it is not merely personal. In order to do certain things, it is *necessary* to have a peculiar kind of mental and emotional assistance. I fancy these things are only obscurely understood. We call it ‘need of love.’ I remember Swamiji’s saying, ‘Every worker feels that, Margot!’—and understand it for the first time ... (2.769–70).

### **Shiva! Shiva! The Work’s Afoot!**

At some point within the next eight weeks or so, Nivedita’s attempts to write about Swamiji took on actual life. On 21 February 1906, the Night of Siva, she wrote to Joe MacLeod: ‘As yet I dare not say it is a success, but at least, the Life of Swamiji is afoot. I am at work! ... Last Friday I sat down to work, and then when I had finished a chapter I turned to the old diary for something, and suddenly it flashed upon me that in those old diaries lay the germ at any rate of *the most wonderful book!*’ (2.788).

Four weeks later, on 22 March 1906, she wrote in obvious excitement to Joe: ‘I am deep now in the Life of Swamiji, and finding out new things about Him all the time. If you care to chat a little in any of your letters, to dwell for a moment on any memory that is dear to you, or to repeat any favourite saying, it would be very welcome’ (2.796).

Nivedita also asked Joe MacLeod to please return some of the letters Nivedita had written to her over the years, filled as they often had been with reminiscences of the swami and various descriptions of their times together in India or abroad. She asked, she reminded, and finally she begged Joe for those letters.

### **Swamiji’s Great Mood**

One particular letter written by Vivekananda to Joe MacLeod from Alameda, California on 18

April 1900, she had once shared with Nivedita when they were together in Brittany, in the fall of 1900. This was a letter which Joe carried in her handbag for years. Nivedita regarded this letter as ‘the most complete single expression that [she remembered] of His Great Mood, in permanent form’ (2.845). Finally, Joe did send Nivedita that letter, or a copy of it. Nivedita responded on 24 April 1907: ‘How foolish I was, not to know, as soon as ever you read it to me in Brittany that this was the expected statement that “He had eaten His mango.” I will explain in the book. Only it shows that California was really the last chapter in the Great Mission. Just fancy! Waiting and foreseen from the beginning. ... Dear Yum, *Swamiji’s Life was His work*, and a wonderful work it was’ (2.858).

### **I Shall Read His Brain**

Nivedita once confided in a letter to Sara Bull a method she might use sometime, to write a book on education. This letter provides a look at her tremendous power of imagination. She wrote: ‘Sometimes for 5 minutes at a time I feel as if I could write an India-shaking book in Education. I wonder! I think when I try I shall imagine myself sitting behind Swamiji—looking through his eyes—reading his brain—and with his pen in my hand. He alone, felt for ALL.’<sup>9</sup>

### **Treasuring Up Each Word**

In a section of *The Master as I Saw Him* she wrote: ‘[Vivekananda’s] talks were not all entertaining, nor even all educational. Every now and then he would return, with consuming eagerness, to the great purpose of his life. And when he did this, I listened with an anxious mind, striving to treasure up each word that he let fall. For I knew that here I was but the transmitter, but the bridge, between him and that countless host of his own people, who would yet arise, and seek to make good his dreams.’<sup>10</sup>

### He Will Guide My Hand

In 1906 sections of *The Master as I Saw Him* were published in *Prabuddha Bharata*. Nivedita also sent chapters to Joe MacLeod for her reaction. On 30th May Nivedita wrote to Joe:

I am so so happy at what you say about the first chapter. Of course I know that if I succeed, it will be *the* work of my life. The one thing, in fact, that I have to give. And I feel more and more that all that training was not really given to me—but to all the Indian generations through me, in some way. I am trusting, trusting, trusting that He will guide my hand line by line, that I might write down those aspects of Him that are Eternal, and be enabled to discard remorselessly all the rest. But you do not know how much I learn, in doing this. All the people who hurt Him—in a kind of way I find that I have to forgive them.<sup>11</sup>

### You Believed in Me from the Start

As publication of *The Master as I Saw Him* approached, Nivedita anxiously asked her friend Joe MacLeod for her reactions. On 9 December 1909, she wrote to her:

Now dear Yum, when my book comes will you please *praise* it, as much as you can? And will you READ it, in order to praise it? Remember, you are the mother, and don't think so much of the effect on others, as to neglect to tell me accurately about that [effect] on yourself. I want praise, but much more I want discriminative praise, and careful consideration, and sympathy, and reproach—just as you used to give, in those hours after you went to bed in your tent beside the Jhelum [during their 1898 pilgrimage]. Remember that no other book written about Swamiji can ever be *yours*, in the sense of this one! For you gave me the chance, and taught me and helped me and believed in me, from the first. And He always trusted your judgement. So you have to work hard over it when it comes (2.1042).

### Swamiji's Offering

Finally, on 1 February 1910, Nivedita was able to

take a copy of *The Master as I Saw Him* to Belur Math and offer it, as she wrote the next day to Sara Bull: 'Yesterday was Swamiji's birthday, and one copy was hastily made ready for me to take to the Math, and put on His sofa. ... it may be that the book is unconsciously written so entirely from the Indian standpoint that only those who have a deeper knowledge of India will care for it. I did hope, however, that it contained a great deal which was universal and I am determined to improve and extend it so long as life lasts' (2.1062–3).

### He Lived with Christ

Now, after *The Master as I Saw Him* was published, questions and comments about the book began to come in to Nivedita.

On 31 March 1910, she wrote to Sara Bull, who had read the book and given some reactions: 'Your letter simply bristles with points. ... I suppose only those who have had literary experience can appreciate all the pros and cons of this treatment or that. I have done what I thought essential to certain ends. ... Only I would claim that this record reveals for all time what was Swami's relation to his western disciples, not one but all' (2.1083).

### The Air of a Messenger; Felt He Had Seen Christ

To Dr T K Cheyne, she wrote on 7 April 1910, regarding Vivekananda's attitude to his own message:

I am so glad to feel that you are pleased with it [*The Master As I Saw Him*]. I cannot say that the Swami desired to make a profound impression on any people. He always had the air of a messenger—as if his great interests were *behind* him—or as if he were *listening*, and telling what he heard. He had a royal sort of air—yet no ambition, apparently—as if perhaps he were too proud. ...

[About Vivekananda's knowledge of the Bible] Of course he felt that he *had* seen



Christ—the Incarnation of the Divine Compassion—and lived with Him—in the person of his own Master (2.1088).

### Freedom of Mind and Thought!

Again on 6 July 1910, she wrote to Dr Cheyne:

One of the splendid things about my Master—and I imagine also about Sri Ramakrishna—was the wonderful freedom of mind and thought that he left one. That is why I have tried to represent his *conflicting* views on a given subject—tried to show the struggle of thought. I cannot imagine pleasing or glorifying him by adopting his opinion as such. I only feel in any degree worthy when I have a strong opinion of my own, in which I have taken due account of his. He said once of his own master: 'He could not imagine himself the *teacher* of anyone. ...' ... I have also given full scope to his unorthodoxy and sceptical speculations about *Krishna*. To him indeed the truths developed and set forth were everything—the personal facts nothing—and this is I think the attitude that wants establishing today (2.1109–10).

### A Choice Religious Classic


Dr T K Cheyne reviewed the book in the *Hibbert Journal*, a highly respected quarterly review of books on religion and philosophy: '[*The Master as I Saw Him*] may be placed among the choicest religious classics, below the religious Scriptures, but on the same shelf with *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* and [French historian Paul] Sabatier's *Life of Saint Francis*.'<sup>12</sup>

One irony that often comes to my mind about Sister Nivedita and all she did to serve Swamiji with her elegant writing talent and keen power of insight is that it apparently was not until early 1910 that she had use of a typewriter. Up until then she must have written everything in longhand and given manuscripts to a public stenographer or depended on a printer to have them set in type.<sup>13</sup>

### In Priceless Memory

In *The Master as I Saw Him*, Nivedita wrote:

A noticeable point [in Swami Vivekananda's talks] was, that one never heard the same thing twice. There was the perpetual study of caste; the constant examination and restatement of ideas; the talk of work, past, present, and future, and above all the vindication of Humanity, never abandoned, never weakened, always rising to new heights of defense of the undefended, of chivalry for the weak. Our Master has come and He has gone, and in the priceless memory he has left with us who knew him, there is no other thing so great, as this his love of man.<sup>14</sup>

With salutations to Swamiji who blessed Sister Nivedita with the ability to convey his blessed presence to us! Jai Swamiji! 

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*Sister Nivedita's Statue in Bhopal*

## ***Sister Nivedita: The Many-Splendoured Marvel***

**Prof. M Sivaramkrishna**

**S**URABALA SARKAR IN HER deeply moving narrative *Nivedita as I Saw Her*,<sup>1</sup> tells us: 'In the girls' classroom there was a picture of Sri Ramakrishna. On the opposite wall there

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was a map of the world. One day Sister Nivedita took the map and hung it under the picture of Sri Ramakrishna and told the girls with her radiant smile: Sri Ramakrishna was a world teacher. It is befitting that the map of the world should be at his feet.' This is characteristic of Nivedita: passionate faith in the Holy trinity. Let us look at this Sister's many-splendoured aspects—of course briefly.

I

Let us begin with a strange but a pre- and well-determined event: a Christian Missionary in India on leave in Britain happened to see the child Margaret Noble. And was instantly struck by the radiance of the child. As he took his leave, he caressed the child's face and blessed her with a prediction or prospect which is incredible: 'India seeks diligently for her God! India will summon you, perhaps, as it has summoned me. Be ready always.'<sup>2</sup>

Child Margaret 'trembled with emotion and impatience. With her father she looked for India on the map and ran her fingers round it. Her eyes were fired with longing while her father held her close to him. That night she went to sleep with a fervent prayer of consecration on her lips' (ibid.). And the father 'in his last farewell' whispered to his wife: 'When God calls her, let her go. She will spread her wings. She will do great things' (ibid.). And smiling at his daughter's future, the father passed away 'asleep'.

The summons were sent by both Christ and the Great Master, Sri Ramakrishna, who had his darshan. In short, Margaret was destined to live with total dedication to both. Perhaps, the Missionary expected from Nivedita to become a messenger of Christ. They did not, at that time, realize that the 'summons' came from one who saw and merged into himself the Incarnate Lover, Christ himself and that was for Sri Ramakrishna. Only Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna? Did she 'understand' this phenomenon? It is easy to assume that she dedicated herself to Vivekananda's mission. And natural to be devoted to him, but what about the Great Master?

Nivedita confessed to a revelatory truth which is central: 'It is not necessary to understand; it is only necessary to be faithful.' Explaining this she wrote: 'I have held so hard to Sri Ramakrishna the

while that if at any point I have been wrong, I can only count it His fault, not mine'<sup>3</sup> for 'Fatigue *will* come, and it is like a cloud passing before the sun, and so on. You know it all! Only—only—how shall one say it' (1.443).

And fall on what? Says Nivedita: 'I always fall back on the same answer—"Where my love fails my beloved one, God's love shall still be infinitely sufficient." [And, result in] Light infinite. Joy infinite' (1.443-4).

No wonder that Jesus and Sri Ramakrishna the one crucified on the cross and the other yielding himself unconcerned to what these days is called the 'Emperor of Maladies'—cancer. Is loving the disciples—the natural quality of God-Incarnations—fatal to *avatars*? Perhaps! This is the price they pay. When Sri Ramakrishna crying intolerably on the top of the temples for his disciples to come to him, it was a global call to share his love. And from all over the globe, people came to Dakshineswar to 'see' the one who never stirred from his abode! My point is that the clarion call came to Nivedita, too. In turn, they spread his love all over. Result, the predictor who we mentioned earlier need not get worried. When someone asked Nivedita whether Jesus was replaced, she said she was made 'a better Christian.'

Nivedita said: 'It is not what life has been to me, but what it has been to persons whom I love—that counts' (1.211). It has been—to people whom she loves—look at what Henry W Nevins, a friend of Nivedita said: 'I do not know whether on the religious side it could be said of Nivedita, as of the philosopher, that she was drunk with God; but on the side of daily life and political thought it might certainly be said that she was drunk with India.'<sup>4</sup>

What was the magic behind? Not only her love for India but the presence of the dynamic SHAKTI behind her. It got manifested through



the apparently simple, loving Holy Mother Sarada Devi. Her profound role is evident in many ways. The absence of the physical presence of her Master, Sri Ramakrishna, created a situation which needed a person who can neutralize it. First, look at Nivedita's perception of the Holy Mother, we can find this in a volume of *Women of Wisdom* by Paula Marvely: 'Throughout her life, Sharada was accompanied by a handful of devoted female disciples, amongst whom was the English woman, Sister Nivedita.'<sup>5</sup> And Nivedita said: 'In her one sees realized that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may obtain. And yet to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind were almost as wonderful as her saintliness. I have never known her hesitate in giving utterance to large and generous judgment, however new and complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer' (ibid.).

We need to add Mother Sarada as an addition to the *dasha-maha-vidyas*. The advent of this *Shakti rupa* accounts for the advent of a new feminist force. It energises a dimension of power which, imperceptibly, checks the aberrations which continuously creep into the world of women. Moreover, there is also the added dimension of *Bhavatarini*—Kali as Power of holistic spirituality—that Sri Ramakrishna chose for his sadhana.

Does Nivedita's 'absorption' of Hinduism mean that it displaced her Christian faith? An observer remarked, instead of replacing it made her a better Christian. The new arrival of two *Kalis*—the Bhavatarini Kali and the Soumya Kali, Ma Sarada—in her life made tremendous changes. She realised the significance of the 'Goddess' in spiritual life. And, to infuse this *Shakti* in the women at large was also part of her agenda. Her role was so crucial and linked

with Kali that Vivekananda reminded Sister in one context: 'Don't forget that you are a daughter of Kali.'<sup>6</sup>

Her inwardness with the Kali phenomenon was so intense that she understood the tag of 'terrible' appended to the Goddess: 'A terrible, an extraordinary figure! Those who call it horrible may well be forgiven. They pass only through the outer court of the temple. They are not arrived where the Mother's voice can reach them. This, in its own way, is well.'<sup>7</sup> And, 'Others we admire; others we love; to her we belong' (21). Thus, love is primary. Sister says, 'the highest representation of the Divine is always human' (27), absolutely necessary for human nature.

This transformation—the inwardness with India's rich spiritual as also related areas of culture, her admirers saw neither missionary in its motivation nor a desperate urge for publicity. As Lizelle Reymond puts it, the philosophy, which she brought with her to India was one of 'Idealism' and 'Independence'.<sup>8</sup> No wonder that aimed at India's political independence and thus manifesting her innate rich potential in many areas. In short, not even an iota of colonialism crossed her mind. And there is explanation. Sister once told the Holy Mother: 'Mother, we were Hindus in our previous birth. We are born in the West so that the Master's message may spread there.'<sup>9</sup>

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The illustrious navigator of *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James, cited her sterling character as: "a most deliberate and balanced person", "who has Hinduized herself (converted by Vivekananda to his philosophy) and now lives for the Hindu people".<sup>10</sup> If a psychologist of the stature of James used the word 'Hinduised', can we identify what this meant? What elements she found congenial to her? Let us

look at Lizelle Reymond's summation, '[Nivedita] had at last discovered a religion whose foundations, classification of elements, and forms of worship could be discussed scientifically; a religion which constantly maintained contact between spiritual and practical life through the medium of experience.'<sup>11</sup> And she was so insistent about knowing, for instance, the subtleties of the *Advaitic Maya* concept from Swamiji. 'She almost made herself ill over it' (45). The 'scientifically' curious Nivedita always kept herself in touch with leading Indian scientists. She gave substantial financial support to Boshi Sen, one of the foremost agricultural scientists of the time, for his research.

'I owe my science to Sister Nivedita,' Boshi Sen said. 'It was she who placed me under Sir J C Bose. It is difficult for me to express in words what I feel about her. In my own little ways I try to express in life some of the dynamic ideas she used to radiate.' Boshi Sen's laboratory was known as 'One Man's Vivekananda Laboratory.'<sup>12</sup>

But, then, there is the other picture of Hinduism evolving during more or less the same period. Its most notorious representative is Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* which Gandhi described as 'the report of a drain inspector.'<sup>13</sup> This is a new category of Hinduism studies. That book got a reprint in 1957. Don't imagine that it was a period piece. It got over the years and now there is a spate of books on Hindu Tantra, degrading it to the *Panchamakaras* as central, and from Chicago, the city that Vivekananda went for the World Parliament of Religions. The University of Chicago regularly publishes books which are more sophisticated and refined versions of the Mayo stink. And the tools of interpretation are invariably psychological from the Freudian point of view. With such insensitivity that even Ramakrishna figures. And one of the authors, Jeffrey Kripal,

stayed for research in Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture. The most recent development is books on what they call Hindu Right with indiscriminate right and left criteria of evaluation. To prove that India is no nation, has no history; only mythical accounts.

But, then, we do have a counter in the works of Sister Nivedita—Her fiery spirit does not hesitate to call a spade a spade. Hers is what she calls *Aggressive Hinduism*—'No other religion in the world is so capable of this dynamic transformation as Hinduism. To Nagarjuna and Ashvaghosha, the Many was real and the Ego unreal. To Acharya Shankara, the One was real and the Many was unreal.'<sup>14</sup> From there she takes a quantum leap to—who else—the Great Master and the Monk who brought 'cyclonic' spirituality to the west with an impact that made yoga a 'national' religion in America. Even to the so-called Hindu India he brought Hinduism in the language of the colonizer which made it accessible to the largely English using Indians—and his volumes are now available in many Indian languages.

Vivekananda blessed her with all the qualities which are needed for her 'mission'. And one outstanding gift she had was what Lizelle Reymond called 'The idea and form' which 'became one'.<sup>15</sup> With the result that 'she was now so sure of what she wrote that she could say "I have attained Samadhi in grammar, whatever I write becomes the language"' (ibid.). A strange collocation but shows incredible intensity of perceiving an idea firmly and penning it with finesse unique.

A deep contemplative mind is the quality, added to a rare gift for 'unlocking' new dimensions of significance for ideas we are familiar with. For such people 'the Many and the One were the same Reality, perceived differently and at different times by the human consciousness.'<sup>16</sup>

Is this comparable to *Bhavana*? ‘Do we realize what this means? It means that CHARACTER IS SPIRITUALITY. It means that laziness and defeat are not renunciation. It means that to protect another is infinitely greater than to attain salvation. It means that Mukti lies in overcoming the thirst for Mukti’ (ibid.). And in a letter she identifies the elements of character: ‘thought, feeling, work, devoted to a single end, make CHARACTER.’<sup>17</sup>

### III

One of the remarkable aspects of Nivedita is absence of dismissing the past as anachronistic. She synthesizes aspects if they have continuing relevance. William James’s observation of her getting ‘Hinduised’ needs to be seen carefully. She felt that ‘The New Hinduism’ is an example, surely many changes and reformations are needed, she felt that not reflection but the re-visioning of the ‘old’ is the path. In short, ‘the New Hinduism’ is not merely the old, ‘given’ a reshuffling based on the changes which are needed for new contexts of the world. Needed if New Hinduism ought to be global.

Citing Vivekananda as the outstanding exemplar she says: ‘When we read the great pronouncements of Vivekananda, they are so like the words of our grandparents heard in our childhood, that we fail to remember that they are being spoken in the midst of a foreign people, and falling upon strange ears.’<sup>18</sup> And this calls a rhythmic change in society, and we may call it revolution. The impact is incredible. If we look at the studies of Hinduism coming from the ‘West’, we tend to feel that if Hinduism does not exist, many scholars—some of course, do not deserve this word—specializing in Eastern religions will lose their tenure in almost all the universities.

Nivedita always stuck to her unshakeable

faith that Hinduism is a global phenomenon of unique significance. She described it as a revolution of a profound nature the elements of which are composite—they link every aspect of life and the secular and the sacred are functional, not fundamental differences. In fact, her profound reverence to Kali stems from acceptance, indeed affirmation of dualities as the basic bricks of the world. In this sense—if we take a profound phenomenon—the Advent of an Incarnation is contingent upon decline of *dharmā*. Whenever the balancing of vice and virtue tilts, then only an Incarnation enters cosmic consciousness. And Nivedita’s—thanks to Ramakrishna—basic attitude is that the world has negatives for redemption and regeneration. Perhaps, we may have to read Nivedita’s *Kali the Mother* more comprehensively.

In this context a flash of light in the blinding darkness of atrocious criticism, there is Ved P Nanda’s survey of Hindu curricula in American schools. I will cite what Dr Ramesh Bahadur recorded for *Hinduism Today*, ‘One day my daughter came home and said “Daddy, what you teach us about Hinduism is wrong, since the description of Hinduism in my notebook is different.”’ And a Washington University Professor, along with others found many ‘factual errors ... the lessons boiled down a complex culture to “Karma, cows and caste” and “glossed over the morality and ethics at the core of one of the world’s oldest religions.”’<sup>19</sup> In short, now, there is some awareness: ‘the aim’ is to highlight the growing dissatisfaction of the Indian Hindu American Diaspora with the way Sister showed.

For instance, ‘Hinduism, Hindus and India have been depicted and mis-portrayed in the American education system and about the urgency to change the system along the same as is already being done by other American minorities



...’ (358). There are other suggestions. To review from the perspective of American Minorities religion census-wise Hinduism is a minority’s religion in the US. But as a dynamic religion it is a holistic, comprehensive faith with immense relevance to all faiths.

You may feel that this is a diversion. I hope not. The leopard does not change its spots! Therefore, we should identify the components of what she called ‘aggressive’ Hinduism. And what about ‘the rhythmic changes in a society’? One would like to infer that this would need a strong bases of social, economic, and political structures in India with the background of ethical values. Though she was good at fund-raising, her visit to the US brought \$4000 from Arabella Huntington for her school. Fund-raising is not the end in itself. India was Nivedita’s chief target—crystallised in the overall development of women and children. And the Nivedita school is a major educational system now.

We have also to look at how Sri Aurobindo saw her: ‘She was a true revolutionary leader. She was open, frank, and talked freely of revolutionary ideas. There was no concealment about her. It was her very soul that spoke ... She was fire ... She did India a tremendous service.’<sup>20</sup> A journalist at New York’s Grand Central Station noticed that Nivedita was ‘possessed of such a synthetic mind and cyclonic personal energy’<sup>21</sup> that drew instant attention.

This cyclonic sister’s energy has taken at almost the end of her life the channel of always simmering politics. Of late the firm conviction that religion and politics are connected seems to attract attention from the US primarily. The debate goes on about secularism and spirituality—this word is appropriate to Nivedita—between religious phenomena and the theological views. One who made her longing for practicing the injunction of the Holy Mother Sri Sarada


Devi—Meditate And Pray—which Nivedita described as ‘Dynamic Immobility’.<sup>22</sup> She was committed to finish the ‘Final Tasks’ (ibid.). What Raymond called her ‘The Last Battle’ (345).

It is characteristic of that she prepared clear blueprints of what needs to be done. For this, Nivedita had to create a band of like-minded persons who can execute the idea. And, one great support to the Government of India—Sir Henry Cotton. He was known for being ‘a champion of Indian Nationalism’<sup>23</sup> and authored significant books such as *New India in Transition*. Nivedita’s nationalist agenda impressed him and he suggested to her that they should think of ways and means to establish ‘a Federation of Free and Separate States’, in short, ‘The United States of India’ (ibid.). Above all, Swamiji himself approved this suggestion and it exhorted them to set in motion a machinery which makes it a reality.

In an essay in *Brahmavadin* Nivedita identified what is needed for our contemporary Indian ethos: ‘The great want of our day is some intellectual common multiple, capable of resolving itself readily into groups of either factor, and the very test by which the sociological value of Vedantic philosophy must stand or fall must be its power to include these two ideals—of increasing civilisation, and increasing simplicity—or not, as the case may be.’<sup>24</sup>

Surprisingly there is a considerable focus today on what Mark Juergensmeyer identified as Religious ‘Nationalism’. Some of his views come closer to Sister’s. He says that except for a few, a very few countries ‘almost all other religious activists regard democracy as necessary for a nation state.’<sup>25</sup> Citing a political party as an example, ‘[it] appear remarkably similar to the political ideals that have become commonplace in the West. This similarity would seem to indicate that religious revolution and democratic values can be compatible’ (ibid.).

When she was invited to speak at a Congress session, she said if they are serious about it 'I shall go'. And during that period she was introspective and yet revealed some apparently strange 'confessions'. She asserted that 'sooner or later, my work will be recognized as real politics.'<sup>26</sup> And, 'I belong to Hinduism more than I ever did. But I see the political need so clearly too!' (ibid.). Her passion for the political freedom was intensely obvious in many ways. She 'had already been marked down by the British police for her allegedly subversive activities' (260).

SUBVERSION is the base of all her activities. And that is to revitalize the many decadent elements in India. Her every version took the form of subversion. And thus, it was inclusive. Though her guru Swamiji, in some contexts, particularly political, told his group of disciples and friends that 'he counted on Nivedita to arouse the political sense among the Hindus' (262). And she did. All this reflects 'the manifold' character of her dynamic life. As Jean Herbert says in his introduction to Raymond's biography of Nivedita: 'It is a page from the history of India; it is also a course of instruction, from which each reader will draw what he can understand. Some will find here lessons in energy, and in devotion. Others will discover in these pages the yogi's secret of balanced life, of that mysterious spiritual treasure which India has carefully prescribed for thousands of years. Others may feel the breath of a still higher inspiration. And all will be true' (vii). 

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# TRADITIONAL TALES

## *Who Are You, Child?*

**O**n the banks of Ganga lived a rishi in a hut and performed spiritual austerities. Madhavaserva was the king of Madhavapuri. He had gone to the forest for hunting that day. After having hunted for a long while in forests and mountains, he became tired. The king had come a long way from his soldiers and attendants. His stomach was aching in hunger. Noticing the rishi's hut in a distance, the king thought that he could get something to eat there and rode his horse towards the hut.

Madhavaserva saw a rishi sitting in the hut with a countenance beaming with compassion and divinity and saluted him. The rishi asked him: 'Child, who are you?' His question brimmed with affection and peace. The king replied: 'Sir, I am the king of this country.' The rishi replied: 'Son, I only asked who you are. I did not ask your relation with your country. Further, "king" denotes a position. If the king of another country conquers your country, your position of the king would go away. Hence, please tell me who you *really* are.'

The king got confused by the rishi's question and could not answer it. The king's hunger increased and he asked the rishi: 'Sir, I am hungry. Please give me something to eat.' The rishi asked again: 'You did not answer my question! First, you said that you are the king. Now, you say that you are hungry. In truth, who are you?'

Madhavaserva started thinking: 'This rishi first asked me who I am. I replied that I was the king of this country. Then, I said that I was hungry. Really, who am I?' The king did not get any

answer; only his confusion increased. The king decided that he would answer the rishi once his hunger got appeased. He told the rishi: 'Sir, first let me appease my hunger. Then I would give you a reply.'

On the other side of Ganga lived a devotee named Shaktikama, who used to cross the river daily and bring the necessary food for the rishi. That day, when Satyakama brought food, Madhavaserva was sitting in front of the rishi. Satyakama ignored the king's presence and saluted only the rishi by prostrating before him and went away leaving the food he had brought.

Seeing this, the king thought: 'This devotee ignored me completely.' The king felt bad and decided to leave the hut. The very next moment, the rishi said to him: 'Son! That devotee does not know that you are the king of this country. Had he known it, he would have saluted you too. "King" is only a position. You would be respected only as long as you are the king. If you lose that position and someone else becomes the king, you would lose that respect. So, tell me now, who are *you*?'

The king prayed to the rishi again: 'Sir, please give me something to eat.' The rishi agreed and gave the king the food that Satyakama had brought. The king had just started eating that a soldier came running in search of him. After saluting the king, the soldier informed that the king of another country had surrounded the royal palace and that Madhavaserva had to rush to fight a war. Though it is common knowledge that hunger makes one forget everything, the king forgot even hunger on hearing this news



and quickly rose to go to war. The rishi stopped him and affectionately said: 'Son, you can go after having your food.'

The king replied restlessly in a faltering voice: 'My kingdom has been surrounded by the enemies! I am restless and without peace. I should go to the warfront right now!' The rishi said to him calmly: 'Son! You are creating confusion again. When I asked you who you are, you said that you are the king. Then, you said that you are hungry. And now, you are saying that you are restless, without any peace of mind. Tell me, who are you in truth?'

The king said to the rishi: 'Sir! I am now not in a position to reply to you. I should immediately go to war.' The rishi was not one to give up easily and told the king: 'Child, you are very tired now. You do not even have the energy to fight. First, appease your hunger and take some rest. You may leave then. Order your commanders to direct the army and start the war. You can join the war after some time.' The rishi's advice seemed appropriate to Madhavaselva and he told the soldier who had come in search of him: 'Ask the army commanders to start the war. I would join the war after some time.'

The king said to the rishi, 'I am now peaceful without restlessness', and was about to have food. When he was about to eat, the rishi held his hand firmly and asked: 'Child! You have not yet replied to my questions. You may eat after answering my questions. When I asked you who you are, first you said that you are the king. Then, you said that you are hungry. Now, you say that you are peaceful without restlessness. Who are *you* in reality?' The king told the rishi that he would reply to his questions after having his food and ate to his heart's content.

The tired king decided to have a nap after having his food. And so, he told the rishi that he would reply to his questions after his nap and

slept in the shade of a tree nearby. Because of tiredness, the king overslept. On waking up, he realised that he had slept for a long time and decided to leave at once. He decided to leave without informing the rishi, who was meditating. Fearing that the rishi would again start asking questions once his meditation was over, he stealthily moved towards his horse.

The rishi was noticing the king's activities. When the king was about to mount his horse, the rishi asked him: 'Child! Are you leaving without informing me?' Seeing that his plans had failed, the king lied that he was checking whether the horse was ready to leave and that he had overslept. The rishi asked the king: 'Child! Don't you say that you had slept nicely? How do you know that?' The king replied: 'I don't even know that I had slept.'

The rishi said: 'Child! You say that you did not know that you were sleeping, or that you were ignorant when you were asleep. What new confusion is this? When I first asked you who you are, you said that you are the king. Then, you said that you were hungry, then that you were restless, and then that you are peaceful. Now, you say that you are ignorant. Now, please reply after giving it some thought. You said: "I am the king", "I am hungry", "I am restless", "I am peaceful", and "I am ignorant". In all these statements, who is the *I*?'

Hearing the rishi's words, the king realised that there was an underlying, permanent, and unique *I* in all his replies to the rishi's questions. The compassionate rishi gave the knowledge of Atman to the king and blessed him by removing his ignorance.

The king then lived like a practical Vedantin and a royal sage like King Janaka. Madhavaselva's life was a great example for the high ideal of 'for one's own liberation and for the welfare of the world'.



# REVIEWS

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Vidyuth Publications, 10, 'Shree Ramyam', Mettu Street, Maruti Avenue Extension, Nemilicherry, Chromepet, Chennai 600 044.

[www.vidyuthpublications.com](http://www.vidyuthpublications.com). Volumes I: 687 pp, II: 346 pp, III: 552 pp, and IV: 607 pp. HB. ₹ 3000 per set. ISBN (set) 9788192542737.

Imagine a large four-segmented window that opens out and commands a panoramic view of four different scenic spots in an exotic pleasure replete with a profusion of colourful blossoms, pellucid pools, chirping birds, and verdant meadows! Well! It is precisely such an Elysium of grandeur that the book under review represents. The book is a veritable encyclopaedia of Hindu spirituality. It is a spectacular stage on which the worshipful bands of ancient rishis, the venerable groups of self-realised monks, the revered bunches of self-effacing super-devotees, the exalting company of God-intoxicated poet-devotees, the holy community of disciplined and dedicated mahatmas silently executing their acts of spiritual ministry under the aegis of one or the other of the sacred spiritual institutions and myriad exalted souls sporting their distinctive badges of spirituality and devotion bestride like so many colossuses radiating the immortal splendour of Hindu

spirituality. The four-volume set is the God-given fruit of a rigorous spiritual yajna of fifteen years, performed dedicatedly by two noble souls. It is unquestionably a marathon feat, a product of daunting and dogged persistence, a marvel of tireless research, a testament to towering dedication, a splendid model of consummate skill and efficiency in collecting, collating, and tabulating a plethora of facts and figures and a fine example of thoroughness, accuracy, and systematic order in the presentation of voluminous data. No words of compliment and praise are adequate to express our gratitude to the two authors for the quality and quantity of the massive work they have turned out. The book is certainly the outcome of a labour of love and dedication.

The first volume affords us a lofty view of the finest flowers of Hindu spirituality—the holy community of rishis of yore endowed with immense spiritual puissance. We get a synoptic view of the background, life, and spiritual achievements of the renowned Vedic seers and rishis. Also, we are vouchsafed, in this segment, the sublime scenery of the hallowed preceptors of Advaita right from Gaudapada, Govindapada, and Acharya Shankara up to the Advaitic seers of the present day, of the wondrous philosophy of Advaita, of the sacred lineage of the venerable pontiffs of Sringeri, Kanchi, Dwaraka, Puri, and Jyotir Maths, of their signal spiritual services of undying glory, of the auxiliary spiritual centres called *upa-pithas* such as Shakatapuram Math, Hariharapura Math, and Kudli Math. In this part of the spiritual garden, we have the good fortune of having an unhurried glimpse of the picturesque spiritual networks of the bhakti schools of Vedanta, of the nuances of their different philosophies, of the illustrious Preceptors of the systems like Acharya Ramanuja, Acharya Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Being a corner of the garden that is redolent of the aroma of Vaishnavism,

this section retails the cathartic stories of Azhvars, the Tamil mystic poets, immersed in devotion to Lord Narayana. We are also acquainted with the complex network of different Maths and their branches headed by erudite and esteemed mahatmas, with the life-sketch of spiritual luminaries belonging to the various Maths like the Ahobila Math and the Vanamamalai Math, with their traditions and customs and with an outline of their spiritual literature. A welcome feature of this segment and also of the other three segments is the reader-friendly gesture of dealing with the serried ranks of mahatmas in alphabetical order. As a crowning climax of the lively and lengthy narrative, a gallery of photographs of the saints and savants, the many-hued spiritual flowers that smile in the garden, greets us.

As we peep through the second volume and cast our glances, we notice that a cool breeze of devotion and wisdom emanates from the Pellucid Pools symbolised by the Nayanmars, the ardent devotees of Shiva. We are regaled with a delicious feast of self-forgetting devotion and plenary wisdom consisting of the life-stories of the Nayanmars, their incredible devotion to Lord Shiva, the liturgy of Shiva cult, the different sects of Shaivism, the corpus of Siddhanta shastras, Shaiva Agamas, Siddhanta Acharyas, the information about the various Shaiva Adheenams. Then, the uplifting story of individual Siddhas, of their abodes and of the Siddha literature follows. Hardly have we assimilated the ecstasies of Shaivism when the sublime sight of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, in all its majestic glory, greets us. A grand vision of the purifying life-stories of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda, their teachings and parables, Swamiji's historic spiritual oration in Chicago, a bird's eye-view of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna and of the renowned Presidents of the Math unfolds itself. This volume ends with a useful index and an attractive picture-gallery of the mahatmas.

The third and the fourth volumes unveil fantastic scenes of a constellation of spiritual birds engaged in their diverse spiritual services and also lush meadows with a few divine cows, Kamadhenus, sanctifying them. A few spiritual swans majestically sail on the waters of Pure Consciousness

in silent meditation with their senses and mind shut off from the mad cacophony of the empirical universe. A majority of the spiritual birds fly and scurry across the vast spiritual sky, warbling, singing, and chanting with delirium and gusto. Some parrots not only sing but speak on lofty spiritual themes in the manner of finished Puranic exponents. The Kamadhenus on the meadows, with their bulging udders, drench the ground with their nourishing milk. To unscramble the metaphor, volumes three and four present an array of spiritual stalwarts who render their spiritual services in their own inimitable style, and vastly rejuvenate and reinforce the spiritual energy of Hinduism. Examples of swans floating on waters in self-forgetting bliss are Sadashiva Brahmendra and Ramana Maharishi. Typical examples of the warbling nightingales are the saints like Purandaradasa and Jayadeva, who are the pioneers in the field of propagation of the discipline of *nama-sankirtan*. Prototypes of parrots delivering discourses are also included.

The third volume deals with mahatmas whose number is a whopping 466. The saints with names starting from A to O figure in this volume. Saints with names starting from P to Z are featured in the fourth volume. Their number is an incredible figure of 368. The total number of photographs that figure in the set is 801. The statistical details pertaining to the book are indeed stupefying and are a measure of the authors' unflinching perseverance.

Each volume has an exhaustive and useful index at the end. The index is followed by a gallery of photographs of the saints. Appendices one and two giving a lot of information on allied spiritual matters, an informative glossary and the bibliography at the end of the fourth volume, enhance the value of the set.

The four-volume set represents nothing short of a sublime satsang that is an indispensable gateway to the spiritual voyage which each one has to start sooner or later. One who has this set in one's home is indeed blessed. One who chances, by divine grace, to browse the book and review it is twice-blessed. The most fortunate one who possesses the set and repeatedly holds communion with the mahatmas is infinitely blessed.

N Hariharan  
Madurai

# MANANA

**Exploring thought-currents from around the world.  
Extracts from a thought-provoking book every month.**

***The Wisdom of Frugality:  
Why Less Is More—More or Less***

Emrys Westacott

Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. USA. 2016. 313 pp. \$27.95. HB. ISBN 9780691155081.

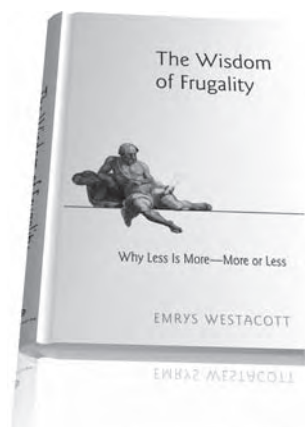
FOR WELL OVER TWO THOUSAND YEARS frugality and simple living have been recommended and praised by people with a reputation for wisdom. Philosophers, prophets, saints, poets, culture critics, and just about anyone else with a claim to the title of ‘sage’ seem generally to agree about this. Frugality and simplicity are praiseworthy; extravagance and luxury are suspect.

This view is still widely promoted today. Each year new books appear urging us to live more economically, advising us how to spend less and save more, critiquing consumerism, or extolling the pleasures and benefits of the simple life. Websites and blogs devoted to frugality, simple living, downsizing, downshifting, or living slow are legion. The magazine *Simple Living* can be found at thousands of supermarket checkout counters.

All these books, magazines, e-zines, websites, and blogs are full of good ideas and sound precepts. Some mainly offer advice regarding personal finance along with ingenious and useful money-saving tips. (The advice is usually excellent; the tips vary in value. I learned from Amy Dacyczyn’s *The Tightwad Gazette* how to make a toilet-brush holder out of an empty milk carton, and I have never bought a toilet-brush holder since! On the other hand, her claim that one can mix real and fake maple syrup with no significant loss in quality failed a rudimentary family

taste test.) But while a few treat frugality as primarily a method for becoming rich, or at least for achieving financial independence, most are concerned with more than cutting coupons, balancing checkbooks, and making good use of overripe bananas. They are fundamentally about lifestyle choices and values. And although they are not works of philosophy, they are nonetheless connected to and even undergirded by a venerable philosophical tradition that in the West goes back at least as far as Socrates. This tradition constitutes a moral outlook—or, perhaps more accurately, a family of overlapping moral perspectives—that associates frugality and simplicity with virtue, wisdom, and happiness. Its representatives typically critique luxury, extravagance, materialism, consumerism, workaholism, competitiveness, and various other related features of the way many people live. And they offer alternative ideals connected to values such as moral purity, spiritual health, community, self-sufficiency, and the appreciation of nature.

One could view the plethora of publications advocating frugal simplicity as evidence of a sea change regarding values and lifestyles that is currently under way or at least beginning. But the fact that philosophers have been pushing the same message for millennia without it becoming the way of the world should give us pause. Many people pay lip service to the ideals of frugality





and simplicity, but you still don't see many politicians trying to get elected on a platform of policies shaped by the principle that the good life is the simple life. On the contrary, politicians promise and governments strive to raise their society's levels of production and consumption. The value of continual economic growth is a given. The majority of individuals everywhere, judging by their behavior, and in spite of all the aforementioned literature, seem to associate happiness more with extravagance than with frugality.

One way of understanding this paradox is to see it as a paradigm case of good old-fashioned human hypocrisy. But that is too simple, and not just because many people live consistently thrifty or exuberantly extravagant unhypocritical lives. The gap between what is preached and what is practiced, between the received wisdom we respect and the character of our culture, reflects a deeper tension between two competing conceptions of the good life, both of which are firmly grounded in our intellectual and cultural traditions. Events like the recession that began in 2008 heighten this tension and make us more aware of it. Hard times spur renewed interest in the theory and practice of thrift while intensifying people's desire to see—and enjoy—a return to getting and spending.

Most books and articles about frugality and simple living are polemical: their aim is both to criticize materialistic beliefs, values, and practices and to advocate an alternative way of thinking and being. Although I am decidedly sympathetic to the outlook they recommend (and my family can vouch for my being certifiably tightwadish), this book is not a polemic. Readers expecting a searing critique of consumerism will be disappointed. Although in places, particularly in the final two chapters, I defend some of the tenets of the 'philosophy of frugality' against possible criticisms, the purpose of the work is not to tell the reader: You must change your life! Rather,

the book is a philosophical essay, an extended reflection on a set of questions relating to the notions of frugality and simplicity, a reflection that begins by referencing certain strains in the history of ideas in order to elucidate issues and to provide a springboard for discussing whether the wisdom of the past still holds today.

The book began as a study of frugality, but I soon realized that it was hard to discuss frugality without also discussing the idea of simplicity, or simple living. From ancient times to the present, the notions have very often been run together and discussed as an entire package of virtues and values. To a large extent I do the same. For brevity's sake I use labels like 'the frugal sages,' 'the philosophy of frugality,' or 'the frugal tradition,' but in all such cases I am referring to the philosophical tradition that associates both frugality and simplicity with wisdom, virtue, and happiness.

The question I began with seemed straightforward enough: Should frugality be considered a moral virtue? Almost every canonical philosopher with whose work I was familiar seemed to think that it should be. But why? These questions quickly led to a host of others. For instance:

- Why have so many philosophers identified living well (the good life) with living simply?
- Why is simple living so often associated with wisdom?
- Should extravagance and indulgence in luxury be viewed as moral failings? If so, why?
- Is it foolish or morally reprehensible to be extravagant even if one has the means to be a spendthrift?
- Are there social arguments for or against frugal simplicity quite apart from its consequences for the individual?
- Is it possible that frugality, like chasteness, or silent obedience in children, is an outmoded value, a trait that most people no longer consider an important moral virtue?



# REPORTS

## **News of Branch Centres**

Sri Tathagata Roy, Governor of Tripura, visited **Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, Agartala** on 9 June 2016. The centre organised a blood donation camp on 3 July which was inaugurated by Sri Manik Sarkar, chief minister of Tripura. A total of 37 persons donated blood in the camp.

The renovated emergency department at **Ramakrishna Mission Hospital, Itanagar** was inaugurated on 28 June.

**Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha, Belur** celebrated its platinum jubilee from 1 to 3 July. Srimat Swami Smarananandaji Maharaj, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, presided over the inaugural session. Swami Gautamananda, Adhyaksha, Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, and several other monks addressed the different sessions which were attended by a good number of monks and devotees. A devotees' convention, cultural programmes, and a documentary show formed part of the three-day programme.

Srimat Swami Prabhanandaji Maharaj, Vice-President, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, inaugurated the yearlong platinum jubilee celebration of Vidyamandira, Arts and Science college under **Ramakrishna Mission Saradapitha**, on 4 July. Swami Suhitananda, General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, former principals, vice-principals, and students of the college addressed the gatherings on 4 and 5 July.

The eleventh foundation day celebration and the annual convocation of Vivekananda University were held at **Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Narendrapur** on 2 July. Dr Jitendra



*Renovated Old Temple of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco*

Singh, Union Minister of State, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, delivered the convocation address. In all, 89 students received their degrees.

On the sacred occasion of Ratha Yatra, **Ramakrishna Math, Puri** conducted a medical camp from 6 to 14 July in which 1,256 patients were treated. The Ashrama also served lemonade to 15,000 pilgrims.

**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Puri** served lemonade to about 15,000 pilgrims and distributed 13,000 pouches of drinking water among them during the Ratha Yatra festival. In the medical camp organised on this occasion 296 patients were treated.

By the joint efforts of **Ramakrishna Kutir, Almora** and several other institutions, a sapling of the historic peepal tree, under which Swami Vivekananda had meditated in 1890 and had a profound realisation on the relation between microcosm and macrocosm, was planted at the very place of the old tree in Kakrighat, near Almora, on 15 July. The sapling had been cloned from the original tree when it was still alive a few years ago.

**Celebrations of the Rededication of the Renovated Old Temple of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco**

The original temple of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, which was dedicated by its builder, Swami Trigunatita, in January 1906, as being 'The first Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World', was rededicated on 29 October 2016, the holy Kali Puja day, after a two-year period of strengthening and reconstruction. Formal worship was offered to Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, Mother Kali in an image copied from a Belur Math image, and to Swami Vivekananda. Swami Girishananda, the manager of Belur Math and a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, was the chief guest, and Swami Devapriyananda did the puja assisted by Swami Aparananda.

Thereafter, with the waving of lamps by Swamis Chetanananda, Swami Girishananda, and Swami Tattwamayana, Minister-in-charge of the Vedanta Society, San Francisco, this part of the rededication ceremony was completed. This was followed by flower offering by Sadhus, nuns, and devotees.

In the evening, in the new temple, from 7 p.m. until 1 a.m., a formal worship of Mother Kali in the image was conducted along with reading from the *Chandi*, devotional music, flower offering, and prasad distribution.

On the next day, Sunday, 30 October, from 1 p.m. until approximately 6 p.m., in the new temple auditorium, a public celebration was held, starting with a 45-minute audio-visual presentation on the history and significance of the old temple, with many photographs of swamis and events associated with its century-long history.

Thereafter the public meeting was held. Swami Tattwamayana, after an address of welcome, introduced Bishop William Swing, retired Episcopal Bishop of California, who gave the benediction. Bishop Swing and Swami Girishananda released the commemorative volume highlighting the history of the Vedanta Society of Northern California brought out by the Vedanta Society.

Then, after an invocation consisting of selected chants from the Vedas by Swami Prapannananda of Sacramento, Swami Girishananda, the special guest, addressed the assembly.

Professor Michael Nagler, professor Emeritus from the University of California, Berkeley, gave an interesting speech on the 'Significance of the first Hindu Temple'.

This was followed by presentations from all the visiting monks and nuns on various spiritual topics. Swami Chetanananda of the Vedanta Society of St Louis, spoke on 'The Swamis Who Had Come to America'. Other swamis who addressed the gathering were Swamis Yogeshananda, Prasannatmananda, Ishatmananda, Ishtananda, Yogatmananda, Yuktatmananda, Kripamayana, Aparananda, and Atmajnanananda. Swami Harinamananda conducted the proceedings.

This year being the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sister Nivedita, Pravrajika Sevaprana from Hollywood spoke on 'Sister Nivedita and the Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi'. Pravrajika Vrajaprana, from Santa Barbara, spoke on 'What We Can Learn from Sister Nivedita'.

At the conclusion of the programme, copies of the 120-page hardbound commemorative volume published for this occasion of rededication, were distributed.

This marked the close of this joyous series of celebrations. The possible functional utility of the renovated building was discussed.

## Relief

**Flood Relief: Uttarakhand:** Shyamla Tal centre conducted relief operations among the victims of the flash floods and landslides at Bastari and Deval Majhera villages in Pithoragarh district caused by heavy rains in the first week of July. The centre distributed 1,750 kg rice, 1,400 kg flour, 280 kg dal, 140 litres of edible oil, 49 kg assorted spices, 140 kg salt, 35 kg milk powder, 140 kg sugar, 35 kg tea, 280 candles, 700 matchboxes, 60 solar lamps, 70 torches, 140 saris, 70 sets of salwar-kameez, 300 jackets, 67 tarpaulins, and 225 blankets among 75 affected families on 20 July. **West Bengal:** Cooch Behar centre distributed 200 kg rice flakes, 100 kg puffed rice, 50 kg molasses, 44 dhottis, and assorted clothing among 151 flood-affected families in Kamrangaguri village in Cooch Behar district on 25 July.

**Drought Relief: Maharashtra:** In the wake of a drought-like situation, the following centres conducted relief operations as per the details given below: **Aurangabad** centre distributed 11.22 lakh litres of drinking water among 25,810 people of 26 villages in Aurangabad district from 15 to 30 June. **Pune** centre distributed 8.64 lakh litres of drinking water among 8,295 people of 3 villages in Ahmednagar district from 26 June to 7 July.

**Earthquake Relief: Nepal:** Continuing its relief work among the families affected by the devastating earthquake that had struck Nepal in April 2015, **Kathmandu** centre distributed 50 wheelchairs, 600 CGI sheets, and 99 sets of utensils—each set containing 2 pots, 5 plates, 5 mugs, 5 spoons, and 1 ladle—among 214 families in Kathmandu and Shankharapur from 4 to 27 July. 🍃

## Free Child Care and Eye Camps

Child Eye Care Programmes			
Centre	Children	Spectacles	Surgeries
Ghatshila	103	—	—
Khetri	13,202	1,466	—
Lucknow	8,386	135	—
Ranchi Morabadi	18,170	342	83
Vadodara	4,168	247	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>44,029</b>	<b>2,190</b>	<b>89</b>

Eye Camps			
Centre	Patients	Spectacles	Surgeries
Asansol	447	93	80
Bankura	6,001	697	1,238
Baranagar Math	93	—	50
Chapra	4,667	415	1,242
Chengalpattu and Chennai Math	867	345	126
Chennai Math	75	42	3
Contai	160	15	15
Delhi	784	—	125
Garbeta	315	10	45
Ghatshila	461	169	169
Gourhati	310	—	20
Guwahati	161	30	15
Halasuru	5,581	1,314	2,029
Jamshedpur	1,330	73	609
Kamarpukur	5,897	1,050	1,071
Khetri	1,833	—	586
Lucknow	24,196	—	3,361
Madurai	2,766	37	561
Malda	94	34	23
Manasadwip	222	—	22
Mayavati	2,603	88	339
Medinipur	516	—	80
Nagpur	205	105	23
Naora	846	148	192
Porbandar	1,014	—	359
Pune	142	48	11
Puri Mission	320	40	—
Rajahmahendravaram	2,793	550	289
Rajkot	2,247	—	715
Ranchi Morabadi	3,049	99	17
Salem	3,934	750	553
Saradapitha	3,536	—	542
Seva Pratishthan	738	80	80
Silchar	3,264	126	591
Vadodara	407	—	40
Visakhapatnam	101	—	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>81,975</b>	<b>6,358</b>	<b>15,255</b>

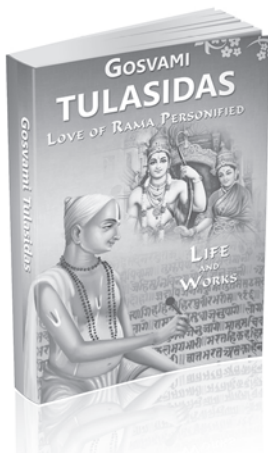


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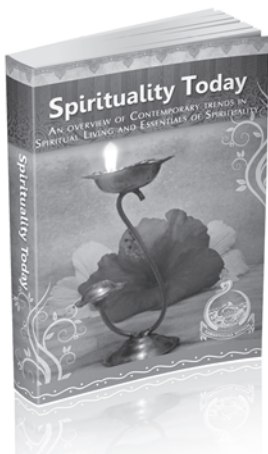
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## RAMAKRISHNA MISSION ASHRAMA

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**Swami Vivekananda Marg (Beed Bypass),  
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### **The Universal Temple of Bhagwan Shri Ramakrishna (Under Construction) An earnest Appeal for generous donations**

Dear Sir / Madam,

Please accept our greetings and best wishes.

Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Aurangabad located on Swami Vivekananda Marg (Beed Bypass) is a branch center affiliated to Headquarters, Belur Math (near Kolkata). This ashrama is conducting various service activities in the field of health, education, child welfare, as well as spreading spiritual message of eternal religion as propounded by Shri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.

This ashrama has taken up a new project of erecting a temple of Shri Ramakrishna. The work was commenced in December 2009 and is expected to be completed by the end of 2017.

The temple will be a unique and imposing monumental structure of its kind in entire Marathwada region in general and Aurangabad city in particular. It will add a cultural and spiritual dimension to the historical city of Aurangabad. It will be a great attraction and a place for worship, prayer, meditation and inspiration for the local people. It is also expected that the good number of general public visiting Aurangabad city as tourists for visiting world heritage sites such as Ellora & Ajanta and pilgrims for visiting Ghrishneshwar Jyotirling, Shirdi, Paithan etc. will include visit to the temple in their itinerary. It is aimed for the benefit of one and all without distinction of caste, creed, and nationality.

The estimated cost of the entire project is Rs. 20 Crores. So far Rs. 15.00 Crores have been spent through public contribution. The balance amount of Rs. 05.00 Crores is needed to complete the construction of the Temple.

**We earnestly appeal to you to donate generously for this noble cause. Your support will indeed go a long way in our endeavor to erect this magnificent architectural edifice in the memory of Shri Ramakrishna who was the unique harmonizer of all the religions of the world and who dedicated his life to bring peace and welfare of mankind.**

**We value your help and co-operation immensely.**

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**Auditorium (Ground Floor) : 80ft. x 57ft. Seating Capacity - 500**  
**The entire Temple will be built in Chunar sandstone and interior in Ambaji and Makarana marble. Ceiling of the Temple Hall will be done in Teak Wood**  
**Estimated Cost : Rs. 20 Crores**

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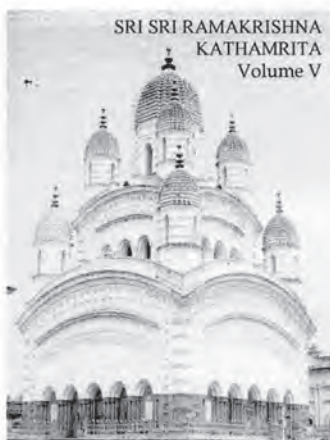
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M. (Mahendra Nath Gupta), a son of the Lord and disciple, elaborated his diaries in five parts of 'Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita' in Bengali that were first published by Kathamrita Bhawan, Calcutta in the years 1902, 1905, 1908, 1910 and 1932 respectively. This series is a verbatim translation in Hindi of the same.

- ❑ **Sri Ma Darshan** Vol. I to XVI Rs. 825 per set (plus postage Rs. 150)

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*We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran.*

*Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best.*

— Swami Vivekananda





## Ramakrishna Math (A Branch of Belur Math)

South Nada, Opp. Ashoka Petrol Pump,  
Haripad - 690514 Dist. Alleppey, Kerala. Phone: 0479-2411700,  
0974 5325 834. Email: srkmathharipad@gmail.com,  
viveka.vira@gmail.com Website: www.rkmathharipad.org



Swami Brahmanandaji

## Help Build A New Centre For Sri Ramakrishna

### *An Appeal*

Dear Devotees, well-wishers and friends,

Ramakrishna Math at Haripad in Kerala was started in 1912 and has been sanctified by the stay of Swami Brahmanandaji Maharaj, the Spiritual Son of Sri Ramakrishna. But by long lapse of time, the buildings have become totally unfit for use.

To start with, we propose to have the Monk's quarters, rooms for Welfare and social activities, office building, Library and free reading room, guests room and a Universal Temple of Sri Ramakrishna. The entire infrastructure has to be re-constructed. By the grace of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna, the plans for rebuilding the whole centre has been prepared.

The estimated expenditure for this project is Rupees 5 Crores.

We invite every one of you the noble-hearted people, specially the devotees of Sri Ramakrishna, to come forward with their generous donations to enable us to erect this abode for Sri Ramakrishna and serve humanity.

Every one, who participates in this seva-yajna (service-sacrifice) will be a sure recipient of the blessings of Bhagawan Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda.

Yours in the Lord,  
Swami Virabhadrananda, Adhyaksha

### Details for sending donations

Donations from India: Cheque / D.D may be drawn in favour of 'Ramakrishna Math, Haripad' NEFT Transfer :A/C Number : 30642551603, : State Bank of India. Haripad. RTGS/NEFT/IFSC code: SBIN0010596.

(In case of NEFT transfer please email your Name, Amount, Postal Address, PAN NUMBER, phone number & transaction details to srkmathharipad@gmail.com This is for accounting purposes.)

Donations from Foreign countries: Kindly draw a Cheque / Draft in favour of "Ramakrishna Math" and send it to the General Secretary, Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, Dt. Howrah (West Bengal), Pin -711 202, India.

In the covering letter mention that it is a donation for Haripad Centre building fund. And inform all the details of the donation to e-mail: srkmathharipad@gmail.com, viveka.vira@gmail.com

### Donations to Ramakrishna Math are Exempt from Income Tax Under Section 80 G.

Old godown used as Monks' Quarters at present

Old building in a dilapidated condition





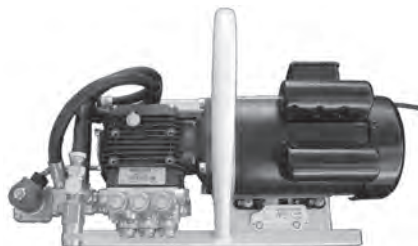
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## RAMAKRISHNA MISSION SEVASHRAMA

(A branch centre of Ramakrishna Math & Mission, P.O. Belur Math. Distt. Howrah, W.B. – 711 202)  
Swami Vivekananda Path, P.O. Bela, **Muzaffarpur–843 116, Bihar**, Phone: 0621-2272127, 2272963  
E-mail: <rkmmuzaffarpur@gmail.com> <Website: [www.rkmmuzaffarpur.org](http://www.rkmmuzaffarpur.org)>

### Appeal for Vivekananda Netralaya (Eye, ENT, Dental Clinic cum Diagnostic Centre)

**Present Infrastructure:** Oldest Eye Infirmary in North Bihar established in 1947,  
General dispensary, Dental, Homeopathy, X-Ray, Pathology;

**Service Rendered (2015-16) :**

Total OPD – 87,647, Cataract Operation : Full Free – 3,325 (SC/ST-1,089, BC-1,365), Part Free – 1,703, Patho Test – 2,799, Dental-3897, Computer Awareness and Tailoring Training, Value Added Competition for 4,000 Students, National Youth Day Celebration, Disaster Management, Non-Formal Education and Coaching to 375 Children

**Our Vision :** A new Medical Building with Specialty in Eye, ENT and Dental care, Various OPD Sections, Well equipped Clinical Lab., R & D Section, Modern Diagnostics, Para medical Training.

**Work in Progress:** Construction of Diagnostic Unit is complete and has been brought in use.

**Required:** Rs.35 Lakh for remaining work of Recovery Unit,  
Rs.65 Lakh for remaining work of Gr Fl. and 1<sup>st</sup> fl. of Vivekananda Netralaya  
Rs.6 Crore for construction of Ancillary Medical unit, Office and Doctors' Qrs.  
Rs. 3 Crore for Equipments,  
Rs.15 Lakh for Maintainence,  
Rs.15 Lakh for Educational Programmes, Puja and Celebration  
Rs.15 Crore for Permanent Fund

**Pictures :**



Vivekananda Netralaya



Diagnostic Unit



Recovery Unit

**Dear Devotees and Friends,**

We humbly request you to contribute towards up-coming Vivekananda Netralaya Project (Eye, E N T, Dental Clinic cum Diagnostic Centre) project which we have taken up in 2011 and has reached to a remarkable stage with your help. This is a request for a place like Muzaffarpur in north Bihar where health infrastructure is very poor and our Sevashrama needs to have a better set up for continuing its medical services. Your contribution will be a real worship to Swami Vivekananda, Ma Sarada and Sri Ramakrishna who lived their life for spiritual growth of devotees and aspirants. I fervently hope by this conjoint effort of Service to the poor and needy we both shall proceed a step nearer to the ideals of Atmano Moksartham Jagat Hitaya Cha (For liberation of the self and good of the world). It will also serve the purpose of perpetuating memories and sentiments of your near and dear ones.

With Prayers to Holy Trinity for you and all yours,

**Swami Bhavatmananda**  
Secretary

-----

Kindly send your contribution by Cheque/DD or by NEFT/ RTGS to A/c No. **10877071752 IFS Code: SBIN0006016** in favour of **Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Muzaffarpur**

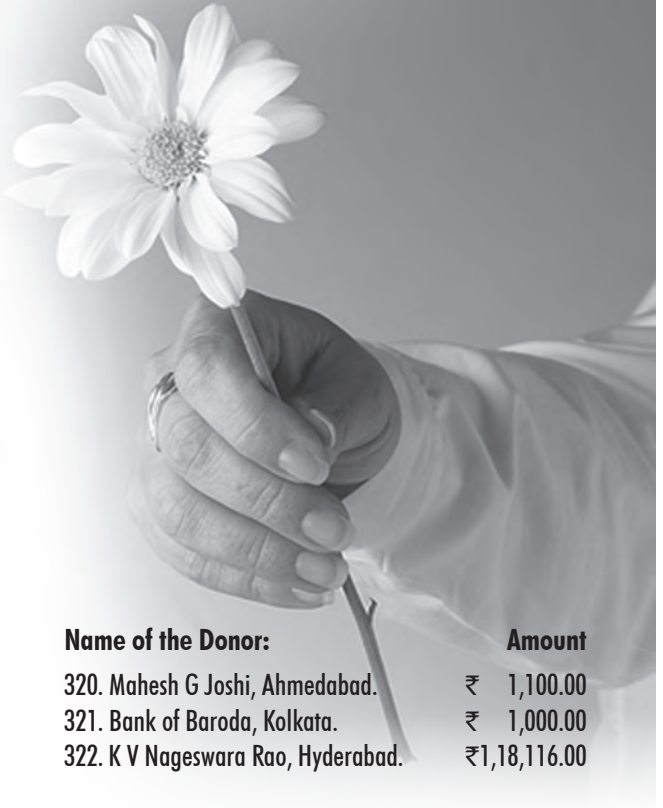
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## SRI RAMAKRISHNA SEVASHRAMA HOSPITAL, PONNAMPET

Naturopathy, Yoga & Physiotherapy Unit

A unit of the charitable hospital catering to the needs of Kodagu District

Ponnampet, Kodagu District, Karnataka - 571216, India Phone: 08274-24 9040 &  
08274 -24 9555 Email: srkseva@gmail.com

**AN APPEAL :** The Ramakrishna Ashrama, Ponnampet was started in the year 1927. We are running a 25-bed Allopathy Hospital since 1958 and Naturopathy and Yoga Centre since 2010. Services provided and activities of the Center are shown alongside.

**The old building is not conducive and so we are newly constructing a building to accommodate House Surgeons, Hospital Dining Hall and also to accommodate Physiotherapy, Naturopathy and Yoga unit in the Hospital.**

**It is estimated to cost about 68 lakhs. An additional 10 lakhs will be needed for the purchase of patient cots, medical equipment and computers.**

Anticipating your favorable response to complete this project within the stipulated time and thanking you,

Yours in the service of the Lord,

*Bodhaswarupananda*

Swami Bodhaswarupananda



Hydro Therapy



Yoga Therapy



Mud Therapy



Hip Bath



Jala Nauthi



Diet Therapy

Naturopathy is used to treat ailments like:



- Low back ache, rheumatism, Arthritis
- Bronchial Asthma, Nasal Allergy, Chronic Bronchitis
- Diabetes, Thyrotoxicosis, Obesity
- High and Low blood pressure and Ischemic heart disease
- Migraine, Tension and Headache
- Anxiety, Neurosis, Depressive neurosis
- Gastritis, Peptic ulcer, Chronic Diarrhoeas and Dysentery, Irritable Bowel Syndrome
- Psoriasis, Allergic dermatitis, etc.

A UNIQUE HOLISTIC APPROACH  
TO HEALING

### Requirement of funds:

Cost of New Building  
(for Naturopathy, Yoga &  
Physiotherapy Unit +  
Accommodation of House  
Surgeons + Hospital Dining Hall )

₹68 Lakhs

Cost of Cots, Medical  
Equipment, Computers

₹10 Lakhs

**TOTAL FUND** ₹78 Lakhs

### OUTREACH ACTIVITIES OF THE UNIT

A total of 3000 people have benefited from these programmes.

Periodic Holistic Health camps



The participants come from different parts of Karnataka. Over 25 camps have been conducted attended by ~300 people.

Camps include Consultation, Treatments, Yoga Classes, Lectures, Prayer, Guided Meditation, Interaction and "Vachanadeva" Reading, Counseling sessions.

### ABOUT NATUROPATHY

**Naturopathy believes in drugless cure.**

This approach aims at healing by –

- 1) Eliminating toxins from body
- 2) Bringing a sense of freshness in the body and mind
- 3) Removing blockages in Nadis for free movement of Pranic energy

### Seminars

Seminars are conducted on different topics related to Naturopathy, Yoga, wellness and holistic health. Theory and Practical sessions are conducted.

**Yoga and Health  
Awareness Classes for  
school students**

Students are trained in Yoga asanas, Pranayamas, meditation and relaxative techniques.

### How you can contribute:

Donations may be sent by A/C payee cheques or demand drafts drawn in favour of "Sri Ramakrishna Sevashrama Hospital, Ponnampet".

Donations can also be made online to our bank account through RTGS or NEFT. Our branch details are: Corporation Bank, Ponnampet, Kodagu District. SB A/c No.003200101001813; IFS Code: CORP0000032.

All donations are exempt from income tax under section 80G



## RESIDENTIAL YOGA AND SPIRITUAL CAMPS BY VIVEKANANDA KENDRA, KANYAKUMARI IN THE YEAR - 2017

NAME OF THE SHIBIR	DATES	AGE	CAMP DONATION
Spiritual Retreat (Eng & Hindi)	19 - 25 Feb	18 to 65	Rs. 2500/-
Yoga Shiksha Shibir (Eng & Hindi)	05 - 19 May	18 to 60	Rs. 3000/-
Yoga Prashikshak Shibir (Eng & Hindi)	05 May- 3 Jun	18 to 60	Rs. 6000/-
Yoga Shiksha Shibir (Marathi) @ Nashik *	16-30 May	18 to 65	Rs 2000/-
Yoga Shiksha Shibir (Hindi) @ Kashmir #	16-25 July	18 to 60	Rs. 4000/-
Spiritual Retreat (Eng & Hindi)	08 - 14 Aug	18 to 65	Rs. 2500/-
Yoga Shiksha Shibir (Eng & Hindi)	01- 15 Dec	18 to 60	Rs. 3000/-
Yoga Prashikshak Shibir (Eng & Hindi)	01 - 30 Dec	18 to 60	Rs. 6000/-

\*Contact: 0253-2621710 Email: [nasik@vkendra.org](mailto:nasik@vkendra.org)

# Contact : Shri J.K. Razdan : 9419220581, Email: [jkrazdan@gmail.com](mailto:jkrazdan@gmail.com)

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5. National Wealth 6. Society & Education & Society & Women 7. New Asia 8. Nation
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### Translation:

1. Reflection on Sri Sri Ramakrishna 2. Childhood of Swami Vivekananda 3. Nari Adhikar (Hindi)
4. Manab Kendric Sabhyata (Hindi)

### Allied Books.

1. Dialectics of Land Economics of India - By Dr. Bhupendra Nath Dutta A.M. (Brown) D. Phil (Hamburg)

The Mohendra Publishing Committee 36/7, Sahitya Parishad Street, Kolkata - 700006.

Contact No. 9830439224 ● 9874725737 ● 9831752901



RAMAKRISHNA ADVAITA ASHRAMA  
D-45/6, LUXA, VARANASI – 221010  
(0542) 2393975 , E-mail: varanasi.advaita@rkmm.org  
A Branch of Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math, Howrah 711202

### An Appeal

Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama Varanasi is one of the oldest branch centres of the worldwide organization the Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math. Situated in the holiest of the holy city of Lord Vishwanath, it was started by Swami Shivananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna at the bidding instruction of Swami Vivekananda on 4th July 1902, with the purpose of Spreading the message of Advaita Vedanta, as preached and demonstrated by Sri Ramakrishna, Maa Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. This Ashrama has been sanctified by the holy visit of Sri Maa Saradadevi, Swami Brahmananda, Swami Saradananda and other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Here, there is the first ever built temple of Sri Ramakrishna where in his first image is being daily worshipped with food offering. Regular scriptural classes and discourses are held every day and all the important religious festivals are celebrated. There is also a public library of 17000 books and the poor and needy are helped as and when required.

The main building of the Ashrama is 125 years old. The other buildings added later, also are 85 years old. The Ashrama is also the home for senior and retired monks. The learned monks also go out for preaching.

The old temple and buildings urgently need repairs. The Library requires replacement of many very old brittle page books & up gradation for which a scheme has been chalked out.

Need of uninterrupted economic power supply is essential for any institution. Solar power generation is well recognized universally for regular power supply and will reduce the financial burden, which is increasing on every passing year on the Ashrama. We therefore have planned to install a 30 kw solar power generation set on the roof top of the Ashrama building. The estimated cost is as follows:

1.	Fitting an electric lift	Rs.15,00,000.00
2.	Replacement of old worn out books and purchase of New books and furniture in library	Rs.10,00,000.00
3.	Repair and renovation of temple and buildings	Rs.25,00,000.00
4.	30 KW Solar electricity Generating System	Rs.30,00,000.00
5.	Corpus fund for maintenance of old retired monks	Rs.50,00,000.00
6.	Corpus Fund for maintenance of temple	Rs.30,00,000.00
	Total	Rs.1,60,00,000.00

We earnestly request all devotees, friends and well-wishes, philanthropic organizations and corporate houses to kindly help financially in this extremely important task of upgrading and repair of the Ashrama.

Yours in the Lord,  
Swami Vishwatmananda  
Adhyaksha



All donations to Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission are exempt from income tax u/s 80 G of income tax act. 1961. Remittance may be addressed to and cheques drawn in favour of Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama, Varanasi. Your donation may be E-deposited in the name of Indian Bank Godowlia, D-48/122, Missirpokha Godowlia, Varanasi, Account No: 449844434, IFSC Code : IDIB000G035, State Bank of India, Godowlia, Jangambari, Varanasi, Account No: 10528315009, IFS Code: SBIN0001190





## Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama

(A branch centre of Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah - 711202)

Vill. & P.O : Gurap, Dist: Hooghly West Bengal : 712303

Phone:(03213) 232 - 400 Email: gurap@rkmm.org Web site : www. rkmgurap. org

### An Appeal

Dear Friends,

Recently on 2nd February 2016, Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Howrah, has taken over the Ashrama at the holy birth place of Srimat Swami Vishuddhanandaji Maharaj, the 8th President of the Ramakrishna Order and started a new branch centre of Ramakrishna Mission as "Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama", Gurap, Hooghly.

We humbly appeal to all our friends, well-wishers and the devotees of Holy Trio to extend their helping hands and contribute their might to make the dream of Swami Vivekananda, 'Service to Man is Service to God' a success.

Followings are some of the essential needs for the welfare activities taken by this Ashrama :

i)	Renovation of prayer hall	...	...	...	10 lacs
ii)	Kitchen, Dinning Hall and Monks' Quarter	...	...	...	1.5 crore
iii)	Free Computer Training for poor & needy students	...	...	...	5 lacs
iv)	Free Medical treatment for poor & needy patients	...	...	...	5 lacs
v)	Free Primary Education for the children from poor families	...	...	...	10 lacs
vi)	Rehabilitation of some distressed families	...	...	...	1 crore
vii)	Vocational training for the economically backward students	...	...	...	5 lacs

Please extend your helping hands and donate from core of your heart to make these welfare projects a grand success.

With prayers to the Holy Trio for the welfare of you and all your family members.

Yours in the Service of Lord  
Swami Anandamayana  
Secretary



- Donation should be sent by Cheque / Draft /M.O. in favour of "**Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama**", **Gurap** or RTGS in the bank of SBI, Gurap Branch, SB A/c No.35179231184, IFSC: SBIN0010544. After transfer please intimate us through E-mail.
- Donations are exempted from Income Tax under Section 80G(5)(VI) of the Income Tax Act 1961. Our Income Tax PAN is AAAAR1077P.

**Route Direction:** Gurap is a Railway Station on the Howrah-Bardhaman (ER) chord line. The Ashrama is only 1.3 K.M. from the Railway Station.

**By Road:** Gurap is only 70 K.M. from Kolkata through NH-2 from (Durgapur Express Way).

“Certain men are born in certain periods to perform certain actions in combination. Ajit Singh and myself are two such souls — born to help each other in a big work for the good of mankind. We are as supplement and complement.”

— Swami Vivekananda.

It was at Fatteh Billass in Khetri that the Maharaja inspired Swamiji to give his message of oneness to the world. It was here where he launched forth his mission to the West, taking the name 'Vivekananda'.

Today, the historic town in Jhunjhunu district of Rajasthan is alive with the memory of Swamiji and the phenomenal impact it had on the world. As a tribute on his 150th birth anniversary, the Khetri Centre has been trying to renovate this dilapidated edifice and restore the glory of this 'Temple in memory of Swami Vivekananda'.

When complete, Fatteh Billass will also have a magnificent museum, bringing to fore the glorious chapter of history that records the unique king - monk relationship and its influence.

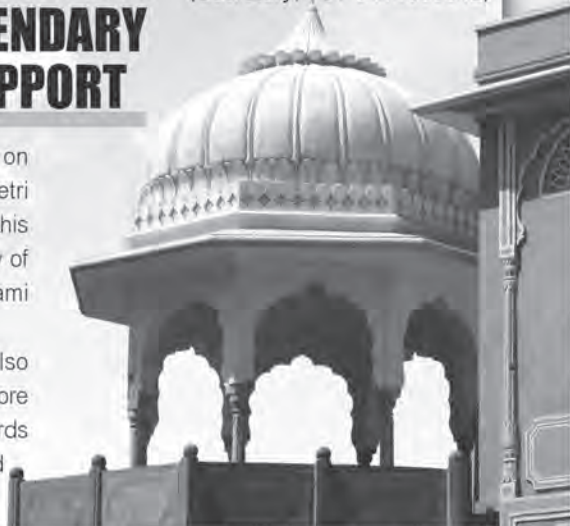
While the restoration process of the 'Fatteh Billass' has been continuing since 2011, with the available fund we could so far complete 80% of the project.

We require another rupees one crore to complete the remaining 20 % of this project. While we accept any amount however small, public acknowledgments of contributions above Rs. 10 lakh will be displayed at the site. Donations are exempt from Income Tax, under section 80 G of the IT Act, 1961. With prayers for your well-being.

Swami Atmanishthananda  
(Secretary, +91 9414083312)



## REVIVING A LEGEND CALLS FOR A LEGENDARY SUPPORT



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A/c payee Cheque/Draft may be issued in favour of "RAMAKRISHNA MISSION, KHETRI"  
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### LET'S SERVE GOD IN OUR FUTURE TREASURES

Ramakrishna Math, Mekhliganj, is situated in a rural setting adjoining India's border with Bangladesh. It was started in 1957 by Swami Rudreshwarananda Maharaj, an initiated disciple of Swami Virajanandaji Maharaj, the sixth President of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. In 1999, a temple was constructed and dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna Deva, and in 2006, it was made into a sub-centre of the Cooch Behar centre. Recently the Ashrama was made into a full-fledged branch centre of the Ramakrishna Math in October 2015.

We plan to enlarge our activities in the field of education, child health, personality development, and skill training for young girls and boys. But first we are in urgent need of funds to repair and renovate of the old buildings. Owing to their poverty, the local people are unable to contribute financially for these noble causes.

We therefore appeal to the generous citizens, philanthropic organisations and business houses, to contribute liberally for the welfare of the poor and the under-privileged sections of the society. Donations to the Ramakrishna Math (Mekhliganj) are exempt from Income Tax under section 80G of Income Tax Act 1961. Cheques/Demand Drafts/M.O. may kindly be drawn in favour of Ramakrishna Math (Mekhliganj) and send to the address mentioned below.

Donations can be made to A/c. No. 35367015024 (State Bank of India, Mekhliganj Branch), IFSC Code No. SBIN0018013 or A/c No. 216973276 (Central Bank of India, Mekhliganj Branch), IFSC Code No. CBIN00280131. Please inform us immediately after on line transfer, your name, full postal address, Pan No. and amount donated, by E-mail: mekhliganj@rkmm.org or by separate post.



#### Ramakrishna Math, Mekhliganj

(Branch Centre of the Ramakrishna Math, Belur Math)

Mekhliganj, Dt. Cooch Behar, West Bengal 735304,

Email : mekhliganj@rkmm.org, Ph : 03584255272, 8942843897

## The Light of the Modern World

Swami Bhajanananda



Pages 268 | Price ₹ 100  
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According to Swami Vivekananda, 'With the birth of Sri Ramakrishna the Golden Age has begun.' But today, for the generality of people, such an assertion may appear preposterous, with no sign of such a beginning visible anywhere. Who was Sri Ramakrishna? What was the purpose of his advent? Did he bring about a silent revolution, unseen on the surface?

This book skilfully deals with these issues, taking for its subject the Avatarahood of Sri Ramakrishna and its universal significance. In the course of his discussion the author presents the different facets of an Avatara and the universal relevance of his message. Many other spiritual topics too are dealt with, all of which go into the making of this impressive and inspiring work.

## Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita (Sanskrit) Complete Set (4 volumes)

Original Bengali by Sri Mahendranath Gupta

Translated by Swami Tattwavidananda and Dr. Ayan Bhattacharya



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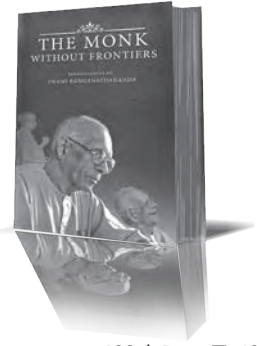
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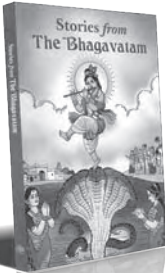
We are happy to notify the readers about the new “ENHANCED EDITION” of *The Monk without Frontiers*—Reminiscences of Swami Ranganathananda. In this edition two more articles on the Swami have been included. The size (layout) of the book has been changed to a larger one, and also the typeset is new, enhancing the overall look and readability of the book. The book now has a new cover.

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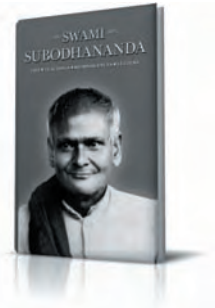
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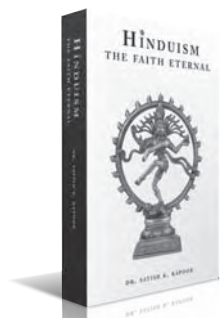
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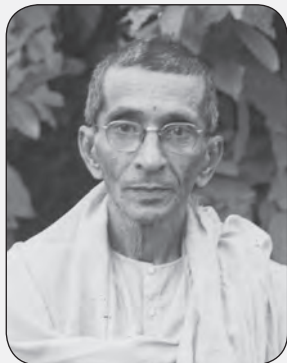
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## Religion, Socialism and Service

Swami Vireswarananda  
(Tenth President, Ramakrishna Math & Ramakrishna Mission)



The wealth of the world is in the hands of a few, while the rest are wallowing in ignorance, poverty, hunger and ill-health. Wealth in society is like blood in the body. The blood must circulate all through the body. If it does not reach any part of the body, that part gets withered and may even lead to gangrene jeopardizing the life of the person. Similarly if wealth does not circulate in any part of the society or body politic, that part withers and ultimately leads to the death of that society. Though socialism is desirable under the present circumstances, it will only be a half-way house and will not be able to solve all our problems. Swami Vivekananda wrote in one of his letters, 'I am a socialist not because I think it is a perfect system, but half a loaf is better than no bread'.

Socialism as it is conceived today is a product of materialism, but the present crisis is not merely in the outside world but also in the soul of man and it can be resolved only by religion which raises man to the divine state. Any amount of political or economic manipulations cannot meet the situation. Moreover, when we come to the establishment of socialism we are confronted with the selfishness in man. An Act of Parliament cannot make him unselfish. So when the Government tries to implant socialism, the selfish people resort to various methods to satisfy their greed such as hoarding, adulteration of foodstuffs and medicines, misappropriation of funds etc. The selfishness which makes them anti-social can be cured only by a higher and more effective selfishness, viz the desire for Mukti which leads to freedom from all the ills of life. If this adaptation of socialism is based on a religious foundation like the Karma Yoga of the Gita or the doctrine of service preached by Swamiji as service of man seeing God in him (Jiva is Shiva), then socialism can take roots smoothly through democratic methods. Thus even in socialistic India religion has to be assigned an important role, so that our countrymen spontaneously accept it and work for it. This religious approach the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission have been trying to present before the nation.

All the prophets and great religious personalities were lovers of the poor. They came for all and not for the rich alone. Our society was also built on a socialistic outlook. Our law-givers never talked of rights but only of duties. Duties were fixed for everyone from the King to the man in the street and also for the four castes which were to serve the society according to the capacity of each without claiming any privilege for their services. So were duties fixed for the members of the four Ashramas or stages of life. It was all duties and no rights. Everyone was expected to work for the nation through his prescribed duties. The present day outlook lays stress on rights rather than on duties, which is alien to our culture. Through the honest performance of duties one can not only serve the nation, but also progress spiritually; not by fighting for the rights can this be done. Swamiji has again and again pointed out to us that 'the twin ideals of India are renunciation and service'.

Service rendered to the ignorant, the needy and suffering as the worship of divine in them, raises secular work to the level of worship and this leads to God-realisation ultimately.

[Extracts from an article published in 'Prabuddha Bharata', July 1974, pages 251-252]

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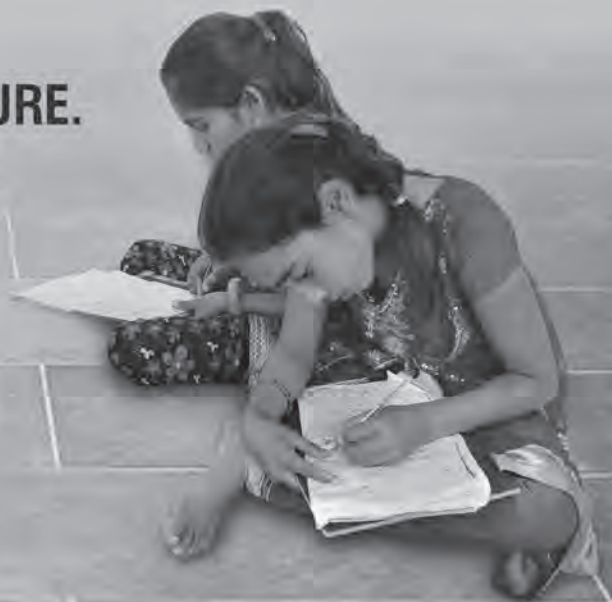
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